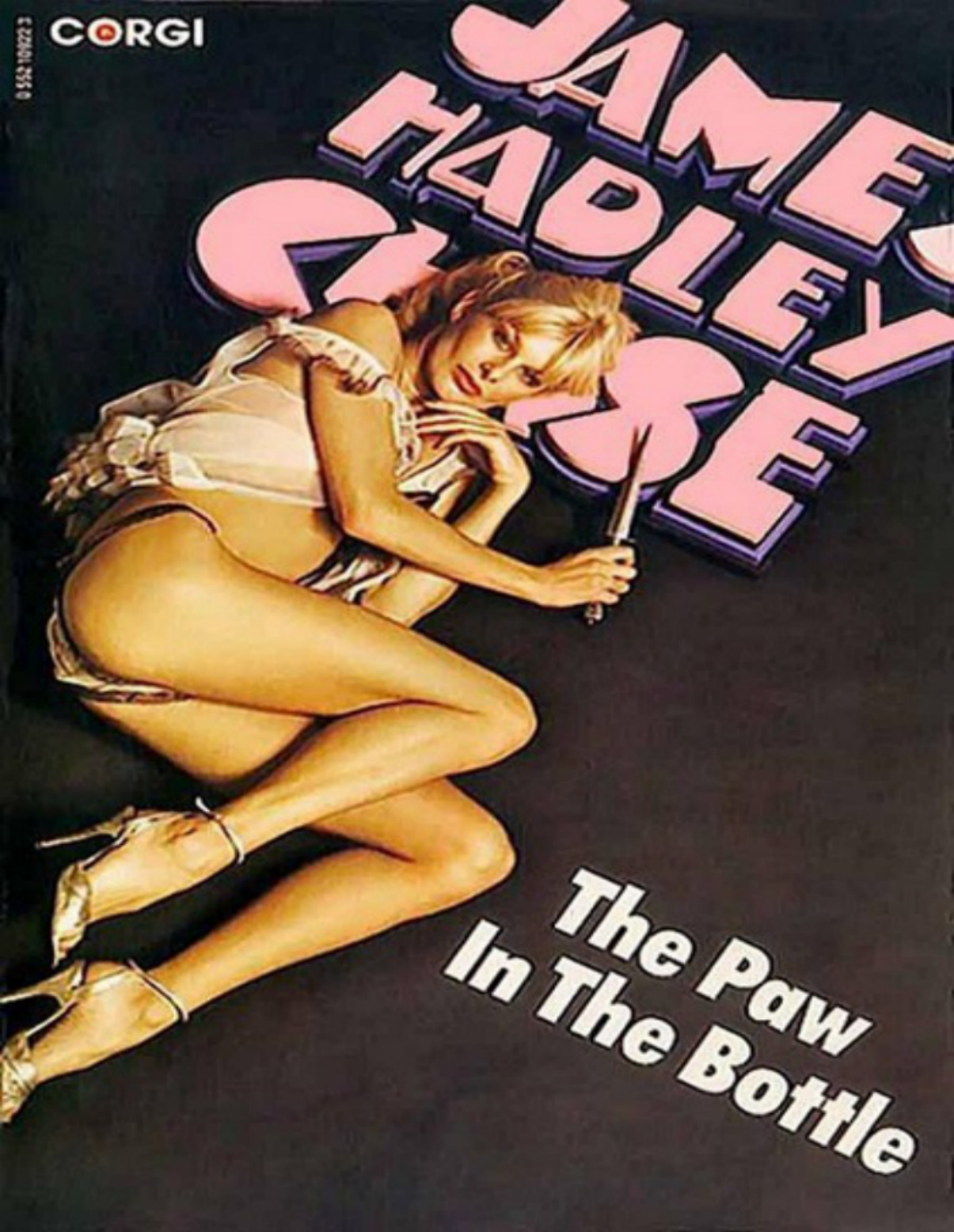


CORGI



James Hadley Chase
The Paw in The Bottle
1949

Synopsis

HARD, RUTHLESS, AMORAL . . . that was Julie Holland - a good-time girl who would stop at nothing to get what she wanted. And when the chance came to play a major role in a furs robbery she jumped at it. Luck smiled on her for even when everything went wrong with the plot and the gang-leader was arrested for a murder of which he was innocent, Julie still emerged from it with a thousand a year and a Mayfair flat.

But she was not satisfied yet — and the inevitable fate of the over-greedy awaited her.

Have you ever heard how they catch monkeys in Brazil, Julie ? Let me tell you. They put a nut in a bottle, and tie the bottle to a tree. The monkey grasps the nut, but the neck of the bottle is too narrow for the monkey to withdraw its paw and the nut. You would think the monkey would let go of the nut and escape, wouldn't you ? But it never does. It is so greedy it never releases the nut and is always captured. Remember that story, Julie. Greed is a dangerous thing. If you give way to it, sooner or later you will be caught.

Genuinely tense.

OBSERVER

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CHAPTER ONE

RAIN pounded down on the pavements, and water, inches deep, ran in the gutters as Harry Gleb came up the escalator of New Bond Street underground. He paused at the station exit and surveyed the night sky, heavy with sullen black clouds in dismayed disgust.

"My infernal luck," he thought angrily. Not a hope of a taxi. Damn and blast it ! I'll have to walk. The old mare'll be livid if I'm late." He shot his cuff to look at his gold wrist-watch. "If this perisher's right, I'm late already."

After hesitating for a few minutes, he turned up his coat collar and, still swearing under his breath, set off quickly along the wet, greasy pavement, his head bent against the driving rain.

"This about rounds off a mucking awful day," he told himself as he hurried along, rain dripping from the brim of his hat and splashing against his legs. "Cigarette deal falls through, blasted dog comes in fourth, forty quid down the drain, and now this mucking rain."

From habit he walked in the shadows and avoided the street lights. Half-way down New Bond Street he spotted the faint gleam of steel buttons. Automatically he crossed the road.

"West End's lousy with bogies," he thought, hunching his broad shoulders as if he expected a heavy hand to fall on them. "That fella's as big and strong as an ox. Doing nothing except making a nuisance of himself. He'd be a lot more useful down a mine."

He recrossed the road when he had put a hundred yards or so between the policeman and himself and turned down Mayfair Street. After he had walked a few yards, he looked over his shoulder. Satisfied there was no one to see where he was going, he stepped into a doorway next to an antique bookseller's shop and entered a dimly lit lobby.

A blonde woman in a leather jacket and flannel slacks, an umbrella under her arm, was coming down the stone stairs.

She paused when she saw him and her hard, painted face brightened.

"Why, hello, *chéri*, were you coming to see me?"

"Not on your life," Harry said shortly. "I've a lot better things to waste my money on than you." Seeing the bitter twist of her lips, he went on in a kinder tone : "And listen, Fan, you might just as well put up the shutters. You won't find any suckers on the streets to-night. It's raining like hell, and there's no one around except the bogies."

"There's you," the woman said, and smiled invitingly.

Harry felt sorry for her. He was on friendly terms with most of the

tarts in the West End, and he knew Fan was having a thin time. She was getting too old for the game and competition was cut-throat.

"Sorry, Fan, but I'm busy to-night." He shook the rain from his hat, asked : "Anyone gone up yet?"

"Bernstein and that stinker, Theo. The little swine offered me half a dollar."

Harry hid a grin.

"Don't worry about Theo. No one does. He's got a dirty sense of humour."

The woman's eyes gleamed angrily.

"I'll fix him one day. I've met some dirty rats in my time, but the things that little beast says to me turns my stomach."

"The look of him turns *mine*," Harry said carelessly. "Well, so long, Fan."

"Come and see me when you've finished," she urged. "I'll give you a good time, Harry. I will—honest."

Harry suppressed a shudder.

"One of these days, but not to-night. I'm taking Dana home. Here, get your little paws on this." He held out a couple of pound notes. "Buy yourself a keepsake."

"Thanks, Harry." The woman took the money eagerly. "You're a nice boy."

"I know I am," he returned, grinned, and went on up the stairs. "Poor mare," he thought. "She's getting fat and old. Give me a good time—ugh!"

At the head of the stairs he paused outside a door on which was the inscription:

Mrs. French
Domestic Agency
Enquiries

He waited a moment, then tip-toed to the banisters and looked into the lobby below. The blonde woman was standing in the doorway, staring up at the falling rain. As he watched, she put up her umbrella and moved into the street. He shook his head, shrugged, and rapped on the door.

A light flashed on inside the room and the shadow of a girl appeared on the frosted panel of the door, a key turned in the lock and the door opened.

"Hello, it's me," he said cheerfully. "Last to arrive as usual."

"Come on in, Harry. They're waiting for you."

"Let them wait." He pulled the girl to him and kissed her. Her lips felt warm and yielding against his. "You're looking swell. How do you do it, and after last night, too?"

"Don't talk about last night." She smiled up at him. "I had an awful

head this morning.”

“As hard and as beautiful as a diamond,” he thought, “and as expensive.”

“Come on, Harry, they’re waiting. You know what Mother is.” She touched his *face* with slender caressing fingers.

He put his arm round her.

“What’s she want? I haven’t seen her for weeks, and I’m damned if I want to see her now. Every time I see her there’s trouble.”

“Don’t be silly, Harry. Do come on, and don’t do that! You’re getting too free with your hands.”

He grinned as he followed her across the small office into an inner room, lit by a desk lamp, its bright beam focused on a white blotting pad on the big desk. The room was full of cigarette smoke and dark shadows.

Mrs. French sat at the desk. Sydney Bernstein and Theo sat facing her. They all looked up as Harry came in.

“You’re ten minutes late,” Mrs. French said sharply. She was a bulky woman with a sallow complexion and sharp, bright eyes. She wore jet ear-rings that bobbed and flashed in the lamplight.

“Couldn’t help it,” Harry said airily. “It’s raining cats and dogs. Hark at it. No taxis. Had to walk.” He stripped off his overcoat, tossed it on a chair. “Hello, Syd, boy; how’s things? Blimey ! Is that young Pimples biting his nails in the dark? How are the spots and boils, Theo, my beauty?”

“Get stuffed,” Theo snarled from out of the darkness.

Harry laughed good naturedly.

“What a lovely boy!” He rested his big hands on the desk and beamed at Mrs. French. “Well, here I am; better late than never. What’s cooking?”

“Yes, let’s get it over, Mother,” Dana said impatiently. “I want to go to bed.”

“Sit down, Harry.” Mrs. French waved to a chair near her. “It’s time we did another job together.”

Harry sat down.

“Is it? Well, I don’t know.” He took out a packet of Players, lit one and tossed the packet to Bernstein. “The bogies are getting a bit hot, Ma. Look at the way they picked up Parry last night. The poor mutt hadn’t left the house before they nabbed him. They’re right on their toes just now. That mucker who shot Rawson’s done it. Start shooting coppers and there’s trouble. I don’t know if this is the right time for a job.”

Mrs. French made an impatient gesture.

“Parry’s a fool. He just wanders around looking for an open window. This is a good job, Harry; a planned job. There’s no risk to

it.”

Harry snatched up his cigarettes as Theo's dirty hand reached for them.

“No, you don't!” he snapped. “You buy your own damned fags.”

Theo cursed him under his breath.

“Shut up!” Mrs. French barked. “I'm talking.”

“Sorry, Ma; go ahead,” Harry said with an apologetic grin. “What have you got in mind?”

“How would you like to take a crack at the Wesley furs?” Harry stiffened. His breath whistled down his nostrils. “Hey! Now, wait a minute. Are you trying to get me put away for five years? I'm not all that wet, you know.”

“That's what I say,” Bernstein broke in vehemently. He was a little man with a face as brown and as wrinkled as a monkey's. His hands were covered with fine black hairs, and hair grew in coarse tufts on his wrists and showed above his shirt collar. “Be reasonable. It's no use running your head against a brick wall. The Wesley furs! It's madness!”

“But you'll take them if we get them?” Mrs. French asked, her eyes hardening.

He nodded.

“Yes; but you haven't a hope of getting them. Why don't you be reasonable?”

“Are you serious?” This from Harry. “You know what we'd be up against?”

“I know.” Mrs. French tapped ash from her cigarette on to the floor. Her mouth was a hard line. “It won't be easy, but it can be done.”

“I say not!” Bernstein said and thumped his small, hairy fist on the desk. “Four have tried it. Look what happened to them. It's too dangerous.”

“He's right, you know,” Harry said, pulling a face. “But it would be a sweet job if we could pull it off. Still, I don't fancy our chances, Ma.”

“You're talking like a fool,” Mrs. French said angrily. “You don't know anything about the job; only what you've heard. All right, four fools have tried to get the furs. None of them took the trouble to find out how the safe operates. They didn't use their brains because they hadn't any brains to use.”

“You're wrong,” Bernstein said, shifting forward on his chair. “Frank took a lot of trouble. He spent four months casing the place, but he was nabbed before he even opened the safe. What do you say to that?”

“We can learn from the mistakes of others. It means there's an alarm on the safe that rings if the safe is touched. We're going to find out about that. That's the first thing we're going to do.”

“And how are we going to do that?” Harry inquired.

"Mrs. Wesley wants a maid. She's tried all the other agencies, and now she's come to me. I've been waiting a long time for this chance."

"And we put in a plant?" Harry looked interested. "That's an idea, Ma. It might even work."

"It will work. if we can get a girl in there who'll keep her eyes open she might find out how the safe operates. If she does, will you take on the job?"

"I might." Harry scratched his head. He thought of Parry. Only the night before last they had played snooker together. Now Parry was in a cell. A job as big as the Wesley furs would carry a five year stretch. He flinched at the thought. "It'll be some job, Ma. I'd like to know more about it first. Is Theo coming in?"

Theo stopped biting his nails to say, "Course I am. I ain't windy if you are."

"One of these days I'm going to flatten those pimples of yours, you little ape," Harry said amiably, "and I'll flatten your face with them."

"We can't do anything without the girl," Mrs. French broke in. "Know anyone who'd do the job, Harry?"

"Well, I know a lot of girls," Harry said, and looked out of the corners of his eyes at Dana. "Depends on what kind of girl you want."

"I want someone smart and young with good appearance and who wants to pick up some quick money," Mrs. French said promptly. "I'll take care of the references."

Harry tilted back his chair and stared up at the ceiling. "Well, there is a girl," he said, after a pause. "She's a smart kid. Her name's Julie Holland. She works for Sam Hewart at the Bridge Café. Syd's seen her. Think she'd do, Syd?"

Bernstein shrugged. A scowl darkened his wrinkled face.

"I don't know. She might, but she'd have to watch her temper. She's a bad-tempered little bitch."

Harry laughed.

"He's prejudiced, Ma. He pinched her bottom the other night and she caught him a slap in his puss. Laugh! I nearly bust my truss. Don't listen to him. I think she'd do. She's got the looks and she's nobody's fool. Hewart thinks a lot of her and you know how careful he has to be."

"Do the police know her?" Mrs. French asked.

"No, nothing like that. She's kept clear of trouble, but I know she's after big money. She's told me a bit about herself. She's ambitious and fed up with scraping along on a few quid a week. I think she's reckless enough to take a chance if the money's good enough."

"We can't tell her anything. It's too risky. And when the job's done, we'd have to be sure she keeps her mouth shut. The police will guess it's an inside job and they'll pick on her. We'd have to make very sure

she won't talk if things went wrong."

Theo leaned forward so the light fell on his face.

"Let him find the bride. I'll see she doesn't talk," he said.

Theo was a short, stocky youth with long, dark hair that fell in lank, greasy strands over his ears and on to his coat collar. His round, pasty face was inflamed with blackheads and pimples, and his green eyes were close-set and cruel. He wore a shiny blue serge suit, baggy and shapeless, and his wreck of a hat, resting far back on his head, looked like a dead, furry animal that had been left in the gutter. There was something horribly vicious and spiteful in his expression and they looked at him, startled. There was a sudden uneasy tension in the room.

"No violence," Bernstein said quickly. "I don't stand for violence."

"Get stuffed," Theo said, and withdrew into the darkness again.

"And that goes for me, too," Harry said sharply. "You're a bit too keen on bashing girls, Pimples. One of these days you'll get a bash yourself, right in your ugly snout."

"Cut it out!" Mrs. French snapped. "We must have the girl or we can't do the job. Does she like you, Harry?"

Harry grinned.

"Well, she doesn't exactly hate me. It's a rum thing, but girls do go soft on me. Don't ask me why." He hastily moved his leg as Dana kicked out at him. "Present company excepted, of course," he went on, winking. "But this kid goes all dewy-eyed when she sees me, if that means anything."

"Work on her," Mrs. French said. "She won't talk if you handle her right; not if she's soft on you."

"You and your damned women," Dana said angrily. "Why don't you grow up?"

"I'm getting along fine as I am," Harry said, patting her hand. "They mean nothing to me. You know that."

"Why don't you two go somewhere and have a nice cry together? You make me spew," Theo sneered.

"I'll bash this fat ape in a moment," Harry said wrathfully. "Work on this girl, Harry," Mrs. French said, scowling at Theo. "We can't do anything until we've got her. I'll want her in about a week. Can you manage it by then?"

"Now, wait a minute. I didn't say I was going to do the job. What's in it for me? It's got to be convincing or I'm not interested."

Mrs. French was expecting this. She picked up a pencil and pulled a pad of paper towards her.

"The furs are insured for thirty thousand. Suppose we say we'll get seventeen for them?" She looked inquiringly at Bernstein.

"It's no good looking at me," Bernstein said sharply. "I don't know

what they're worth until I've seen them. But seventeen's too much, anyway. More like ten if they're as good as you say they are. But I want to see the stuff before I talk prices."

"Then there's the jewellery," Mrs. French went on, deciding to ignore Bernstein. She began scribbling on the paper while the others watched her, "Your cut, Harry, shouldn't be less than eight thousand. It might be more."

"Gripes!" Harry exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. "Now you're talking. For eight thousand . . ."

"This is crazy!" Bernstein cried. His hands fluttered over the desk like two frightened bats. "You can't make such promises. You want me to take the stuff, don't you? Well then, I make the price. You can't say they'll be worth this and that. I must see the stuff first."

"If you can't talk figures, Syd, someone else will," Mrs. French said mildly. "You're not the only fence who'd like to handle the Wesley's furs."

Theo nudged Bernstein.

"Stuff that up your vest and see how it fits," he said, and laughed.

Rain splashed against the windows and ran in gurgling little rivers in the gutters. The lone policeman, walking down Mayfair Street, snug in his rainproof cape, had no idea that a robbery was being planned within a few yards of him. He wasn't interested in robberies. He was thinking of the spring cabbages he had planted that afternoon. The rain, he reckoned, would give them a fine start.

II

If you happen to look for them, you will find an odd assortment of cafés, restaurants and clubs that somehow manage to conceal themselves in the jungle of brick, stone and dirty windows along King's Street, Fulham Palace Road and Hammersmith Bridge Road. You may wonder how such derelict-looking places keep open; who amongst the teeming crowd of shoppers and loafers converging from Hammersmith Broadway are likely to go to such places for a meal. But it is only at night, and in the small hours of the morning, that these particular cafes and restaurants come to life. If you happened to be in the district after eleven o'clock, you would find them crowded with a rather sinister-looking collection of men and women who sit over their tea or coffee talking in low tones, and who glance up suspiciously whenever the door opens and relax when the newcomer is recognized.

It is to such places that the Service deserters, tired of remaining in their rat-holes, come for a quick coffee and a look round before going to the West End; where the small gangs meet to check the final details of a new haul, and where the filthiest of all the scrapings of London's gutters—the painted youths in sandals and bright sweaters—cat before beginning their nightly prowls.

The king among these cafes and restaurants was the Bridge Cafe, owned by Sam Hewart, a dumpy, hard-faced man of indeterminable age. He had taken over the cafe during the height of the London blitz, and had got it cheap. Hewart believed in looking ahead, and he knew sooner or later there would be a need for such a place in such a district : a place for the wide boys to meet, to leave messages that they knew would be delivered, to get information, to be told who was in Town and who wasn't, and who was paying the best prices at the moment for silk stockings, cigarettes, and even mink coats.

Six months ago a girl had come to Hewart's office. Her name was Julie Holland, and she worked at a nearby twopenny library. She had heard, she told him, there was a vacancy on his staff.

"I could be useful," she had said quietly. "I'm not fussy what I do."

Hewart had been impressed. He liked the way her dark, shiny tresses fell in natural waves each side of her small, rather pale face. He liked her alert grey eyes, and he particularly liked her figure, which, he thought in his loose-minded way, would be sensational without clothes. He couldn't understand how it was he hadn't seen her before. If, as she said, she worked in the library he should have seen her. He was annoyed with himself because he hadn't seen her. It made him feel old. He wouldn't have missed her five years ago, he told himself. He spent nearly all his waking hours thinking about girls.

They dwelt in his mind consciously and subconsciously the way death sometimes dwells in the minds of the timid; although lately he hadn't been as preoccupied with these thoughts as he used to be, and when he was conscious of this it worried him. It was, he told himself bitterly, a sign of age.

This girl who now stood before him aroused in him an almost forgotten feeling of desire. She wore a sweater that showed off her breasts and her skirt was tight and short. There was scarcely a line of her body that he couldn't see. Her lipstick was vivid and put on to make her mouth look square, and her lips had a soft, yielding look that made Hewart feel short of breath.

He would have been startled and annoyed had he known she had deliberately dressed herself in this way to appeal to his ageing sense of lust. An amiable young spiv had given her the tip that Hewart wanted a smart girl who could keep her mouth shut. Hewart was all right, the spiv had told her, if she didn't mind being pawed occasionally.

"He's getting old," the spiv had said, with a cynicism that appealed to Julie. "You know what old men are like. It's all handy-pandy stuff; nothing you couldn't handle."

As for the café . . . well, she didn't have to be told what some of the cafes were like in that district, and the Bridge Cafe was no exception, but the money Hewart paid was good. That was the point. The money was excellent. "He'll pay six quid, maybe more, and if you let him pinch your leg occasionally, you might screw him up to seven."

Seven pounds a week! At that time such a sum was the pinnacle of Julie's ambition. She made up her mind to get the job. What did she care if Hewart were tiresome? She was used to that sort of thing by now. Seven pounds a week! It was a fortune.

Julie was twenty-two years of age. Twenty of these years had been milestones of bitter poverty, of pinching and scraping and making do. Her parents had been miserably poor, her home squalid and dirty, and she had been continually hungry. As long as she could remember she had had a desperate, trapped feeling that life was slipping away from her, and she was missing all the good things that would have been hers had she the money to buy them. It was hunger that formed her character. It was hunger that sharpened her wits, and made her sly and cunning. Hunger and envy; for envy tormented her, making her a morose and unsociable child, and later a shrewd, hard, calculating young woman.

As soon as she was old enough to discriminate between those who have and those who have not, envy had laid hold of her. She envied people with clean homes, good clothes, cars, and the blind beggar who stood at the corner of her street when people gave him money. She envied the other children at school if they were better dressed

than she. She pestered her parents for more to eat, for pocket money, for better clothes until, exasperated by his inability to give her what she wanted, her father flogged her to silence. But the flogging didn't cure her of envy. She was determined to have the good things of life, and since her parents failed to provide them, she began to help herself. At first she took only small things : a bar of chocolate from a classmate; a bun, sneaked off the baker's counter; a hair ribbon from her sister; a wooden peg-top from the boy next door. She took with cunning and no one suspected her. But the more she took, the more she wanted, and to celebrate her twelfth birthday she raided the jewellery counter in Woolworth's. But this time she wasn't dealing with children, and she was caught.

The magistrate had been lenient. He understood children, and when he had read the report on Julie's home life, he called her to him. She was too frightened to remember all he said to her, but she did remember the fable of the monkey and the bottle he had selected as the corner stone for his sermon.

"Have you ever heard how they catch monkeys in Brazil, Julie?" he had asked, to her surprise. "Let me tell you. They put a nut in a bottle, and tie the bottle to a tree. The monkey grasps the nut, but the neck of the bottle is too narrow for the monkey to withdraw its paw and the nut. You would think the monkey would let go of the nut and escape, wouldn't you? But it never does. It is so greedy it never releases the nut and is always captured. Remember that story, Julie. Greed is a dangerous thing. If you give way to it, sooner or later you will be caught."

He had sent her home, and she hadn't stolen again.

But as she grew up her envy of riches increased and her mind was obsessed with the longing for money. When her parents were killed in an air raid and she set up on her own in a dingy bed-sitting-room, the unexpected freedom of supervision led to the discovery of a hitherto unsuspected means to get what she wanted. She learned, now that she could stay out at all hours of the night, that there was something about her that attracted men. She had been vaguely aware of this power for some time, and at first she had resented the way men, at the slightest opportunity, put their hands on her. She was irritated when bus conductors helped her off the bus, when old gentlemen took her arm and insisted on seeing her across the road, or when a heavily-breathing man ran his hand down her leg in a cinema while he pretended to hunt for a dropped article in the darkness. But, after a while, she became used to these attentions, and now she had freedom she wondered if she couldn't capitalize this power.

The war and the coming of the American troops gave her the opportunity, and she joined the vast army of other young girls who

came from the East End to have a good time with the Yanks.

Although only seventeen at that time, Julie quickly acquired a sophistication that distinguished her from the other giggling chits who hung about at street corners ogling the G.I.s as they loafed along Piccadilly. She mixed exclusively with the officer ranks, and her dingy bed-sitting-room scarcely ever saw her at night. Before long she acquired a veneer that a steam hammer couldn't crack, a wardrobe of flashy clothes, an intimate knowledge of the physical desires of men and fifty pounds in the Post Office Savings Bank. For a time she lived well, but the war ended and the Americans went home. Then followed the lean years, and life became a wangle. She had to wangle to avoid being sent to a factory. She had to wangle to get clothing coupons, food and money. She was lucky to get the job at the twopenny library, although it only paid two pounds ten a week.

It was all a wangle now, and she began to realize that those who didn't take risks these days were in for a thin time. It seemed now that you were either honest and went short or you were dishonest and had a good time. There seemed to be no happy medium. She knew the Bridge Cafe had an unsavoury reputation and was a meeting place of crooks, but the money was good, and that was all that mattered. She was sick of making do on fifty shillings a week.

"If you work for Hewart you'll meet all the wide boys," the young spiv had told her. "Play your cards right and you won't be short of anything. A girl with your looks should be having fun. You don't call this library fun, do you?"

Seven pounds a week ! That decided her. What did it matter if the cafe was shady? She could look after herself. If Hewart would have her, she was ready to work for him.

As soon as Hewart saw her he knew she was the right type for the job.

"There's two jobs going here," he told her. "One of them is for the day shift and pays three quid a week. There's not much to it. A bit of cleaning, preparing sandwiches for the night trade. Not much of a job . . . but a job."

"And the other?" Julie asked, knowing well enough that the second job was the one she was going to take.

"Ah," and Hewart winked. "The other's a good job. A job for an ambitious girl who can keep her mouth shut. Might suit you."

"And what does that pay?"

"Seven quid a week. You'd look after the cash desk and take messages. It's night work—from seven to two in the morning. But you'd have to keep your mouth shut, and when I say shut, I mean shut, see?"

"I don't talk," Julie said steadily.

"It doesn't pay to; anyway, not in this neighbourhood. I remember a girl, not much older than you, and as pretty, who heard something that didn't concern her, and she talked. You know how it is : girls like to talk; second nature to 'em. They found her in a back alley. Made a mess of her looks. No, it doesn't do to talk."

"You don't scare me," Julie said sharply. "I wasn't born yesterday."

"That's right," Hewart grinned at her. "You're smart. The moment I saw you I knew you'd do. Now, listen, we give our customers service, see? Taking messages is an important part of the service. You'll have to be smart about that. Nothing must be written down. You'll have to pass the messages quick. There may be as many as twenty a night. For instance, you may get a "phone call for Jack Smith, see? You'll have to know who he is and whether he's in the place or not. If he isn't, you say so and take the message. It's your job to see Smith gets it as soon as he comes in, and no one else must know about it. You'll have to be smart all the time. But you can do it. There're no flies on you." Seeing her hesitate, Hewart went on : "You won't know anything, see? What you don't know about you can't get into trouble about, can you? This is a chance to pick up a little easy money. Some of the boys will slip you a quid, maybe two, for giving them a message. I've seen it done. And listen, I like you. I'll make it eight quid if you'll take the job. Can't be fairer than that, can I? The boys'll be crazy about you. You're smart; pretty, too. I know a good thing when I see it. Think : eight beautiful pound notes every Friday. Think of the silk stockings you can buy."

But Julie wanted to know more about the job before being rushed into it. She said so.

"That's where you're wrong," Hewart said. "You don't want to know anything—like me. I just run this place, see? The boys and girls come here. They leave messages; sometimes a parcel or two, and I give 'em food and a little service, but I don't ask questions. Sometimes the bogies look in. They want to know this and that. I don't know anything so I can't tell 'em lies, can I? They may talk to you, but if you don't know anything what can you tell 'em? That's what I call being smart."

"The police come here?" Julie asked, startled. "I don't think I'd like that."

Hewart waved his hand impatiently.

"You know as well as I do the police poke their noses in everywhere. It's their job. It doesn't matter where you work, the police'll look in sooner or later. Who cares? We're not doing anything shady : we're giving service. It's not our funeral if our customers get up to tricks, is it? And besides, why do you think I'm offering eight quid? The job's worth fifty bob. I could get dozens of girls for fifty bob

: hundreds of 'em. But I'm paying eight quid because the bogies might ask questions. I don't say they will, but they might; and I know a girl doesn't like being mixed up with the police. No one does, so I pay a little more."

Put like that it seemed reasonable enough, and the money, of course, was marvellous. If she let this chance slip through her fingers she might never get another.

"All right," she said, "I'll take it."

She was surprised how easy the work turned out to be. The café didn't get busy until after eleven o'clock. Then the regular customers began to drift in and soon the place was full of cigarette smoke and the murmur of voices. It was like having a front row in the stalls, Julie thought. Sitting in the glass-screened cash desk, she didn't feel she was part of the room, but rather an unseen observer looking through a secret window at an odd, exciting play. Hewart, cigar between his teeth, a big diamond ring flashing on his little finger, had stayed with her on her first night. He kept up a muttered commentary on the people in the room.

"The bloke over there in the fawn coat is Syd Bernstein," his voice droned in Julie's ears. "Remember him. He's got a big fur store in Gideon Road : expect you've seen it. If you ever want a cheap fur go to Syd. He'll fix you up if you mention my name. The fella he's talking to is the Duke. They call him that because of his beautiful manners. You watch him. You'll never catch *him* drinking out of his saucer. Never mind what he does for a living. The less you know . . . That's Pugsey over there. The fella in the grey suit; big dog-racing man. Knows more about doping dogs . . ." Hewart caught himself up, cleared his throat : "Well, never mind that. He's Pugsey; just remember who he is and forget the rest. The bloke lighting a cigarette is Goldsack. Now there's a smart "un for you. When I met him—couldn't be more than a couple of years ago—he wasn't worth thirty bob. That's straight. Now he can write a cheque for ten thou, and thinks nothing of it. He's one of the big betting boys."

Julie got to know Bernstein and Pugsey and the rest. She overheard things. For instance, she overheard a few scattered words from Pugsey as he and the Duke passed her.

"I won't split them," Pugsey was saying. "Twenty-five thousand or nothing. You can handle them all right. What's worrying you?"

"That's a big number for me," the Duke returned doubtfully. "Most of 'em are Players, you say?"

"That's right." Pugsey glanced up, caught Julie's eye, and winked.

"Twenty-five thousand Players," Julie thought. "How much would they make out of that deal?" She saw in the next morning's newspaper that twenty-five thousand cigarettes had been stolen from a

Houndsditch warehouse. It wasn't difficult to put two and two together.

Life in the cafe was full of variety and excitement. The telephone kept her busy. The messages she received meant nothing to her. "Tell Pugsey greyhound looks good. Got it? Greyhound looks good."

"Ask Mr. Goldstack to call me. Boy Blue at twelve."

"Message for Mr. Bernstein. Usual time; usual place, C.O.D." And so on, code messages that puzzled and intrigued her; that meant money to the men who received them. Pugsey, Goldsack and the others were making themselves rich by these messages because they were wide and in the know. She envied them, although she knew she shouldn't grumble, for by the end of her third week she was earning twelve pounds a week: eight from Hewart and four from tips.

But the more she earned the more she wanted. Her expenses had gone up. She had taken a small furnished flat in the Fulham Palace Road that cost four pounds a week. She had bought clothes; and she spent money on cinemas and useless junk she picked up in the big stores. It was nice not to work during the day; nice, but lonely. She hadn't any friends. That was the snag of working a night-shift. You never had the chance of meeting anyone during the day: they were all at work.

She needed male companionship, and sighed for the days when she could have had her pick of escorts by hanging about outside one of the Officers' Clubs. Going to the cinema on your own wasn't much fun. She wanted a man who would say nice things to her, buy her presents, and on whom she could bestow favours if she felt so inclined.

The men she met in the café were too busy making money to bother with her. She could have had Hewart easily enough but he was too old. At first he was tiresome, but she quickly learned how to handle him. Enclosed in the glass cash-desk all the evening, he didn't get much chance of pawing her. The time to watch out was when she arrived and when she left, and she took care to arrive and leave with the other members of the staff. To keep him happy, she allowed him a few liberties, and as the spiv had said, he was easily satisfied. She wanted a companion of her own age, who could share her interests and wouldn't be pawing her all the time.

She had been working at the cafe for over three months when Harry Gleb breezed in. She was interested in him the moment she saw him, for Harry had a terrific personality. His wide grin made you want to grin too. His laugh was infectious, his confidence in himself enormous. He was a dashing, colourful figure, and well dressed; his hand-painted tie made Julie gasp. He had a great deal of dark wavy hair, a fine pencil-line moustache, greenish eyes that twinkled with an

expression of bawdy good humour. Although he was hard, without scruples, shallow, cocky and selfish, you couldn't help liking him. He was always smiling, always ready to crack a joke, to lend you a quid, to get a termer on the toss of a coin or drink you under the table. He knew most of the waiters in the swagger West End restaurants by their Christian names. He knew most of the West End tarts, the playboys and the gold diggers, and they liked him. He was a typical London spiv, and he didn't care who knew it.

He seemed to Julie to be someone right out of a motion picture. Comparing him to other men who frequented the cafe was like comparing Clark Gable to the fat old man who sat next to her in the underground.

But she was too fly to let him know the impression he had made on her. She was confident of her powers of attraction, and she was sure, sooner or later, he would make the first overtures.

At this time Harry was doing a deal with Syd Bernstein. He didn't like the Bridge Cafe, nor did he like Hewart, but as Bernstein always went there Harry began going there, too.

He was quick to spot Julie as she sat in the cash-desk, and, as any pretty girl mildly interested him, he took a mild interest in her. It wasn't until one evening when Julie left the en-closed cash-desk to give a message to the Duke, that Harry had the opportunity of seeing her figure, and immediately he gave a long, low whistle.

"That's a nice bit of crackling," he said to Bernstein, and jerked his thumb towards Julie. "Where did Sam find her?"

Bernstein had no idea, and after he had gone Harry wandered over to the cash-desk and began to flirt with Julie.

She had been waiting patiently for this opportunity, but she didn't let him see her eagerness. She was cool to him, laughed at his flattery, and snubbed him when he became familiar.

Women were attracted to Harry as pins to a magnet. Julie's behaviour surprised him. Women were a lot of soppy mares, he had always considered, but they were fun if you had nothing better to do. But this girl was different. He could tell that. She was friendly enough, but there was a jeering expression in her eyes that irritated him. It showed plainly that she knew what he was up to, and was certainly not going to take him seriously. He could be as nice and flattering as he liked, but it wouldn't get him anywhere.

This attitude intrigued him, as Julie intended it to intrigue him, and he was continually popping in to have a word with her, to bring her a pair of silk stockings or a box of chocolates, and to try to break down the jeering barrier she had erected to keep him at safe limits. He had asked her time and again to go out with him, but Julie refused. She wasn't going to risk being dropped. She had had a lot of experience

with men, and she knew the longer she kept him dangling on a string the more ardent he would be when she did give in.

When Mrs. French asked him if he knew of a girl who'd help them, he immediately thought of Julie. She wanted money, had brains, and was sufficiently reckless to take a chance. But he was a little worried by her persistent refusal to become friendly. Somehow he had to rush her defences, and the best way, he decided, was for her to lose her job at the café before he put the proposition to her. So long as she had a job and some regular money coming in she was independent, and if she had scruples she might turn him down. Harry had a horror of independent women. It was Julie's independence that kept them apart now. He was sure of that.

The first thing, then, was to get her the sack. But how was he going to do that? He racked his brains to no purpose. She was in solid with Hewart, and there seemed no reason why she should ever leave the cafe.

"Well, something will turn up," he consoled himself. "It always does."

And it did, but not in quite the way he expected.

III

Two evenings after the meeting in Mrs. French's office, the telephone on Julie's desk rang, and a woman's voice, breathless and urgent, asked : "Is Mr. Harry Gleb there, please?"

Julie felt a tingle run up her spine. She hadn't seen Harry for three days. She was beginning to wonder if she had handled him a little too roughly, and had driven him to some other woman.

"I'm afraid he isn't," she said, wondering who the woman could be.

"Are you sure? It's very urgent. He said he'd be there. Will you please make sure?"

There was a hysterical note in the voice that startled Julie.

Hewart, coming from his office and seeing Julie looking round the cafe, trying to penetrate the thick screen of tobacco smoke, came over.

"What's up?"

"A woman asking for Mr. Gleb. She sounds worried."

"All Gleb's women are worried," Hewart said, and smiled sourly. "It's the natural state of their health, the damn fools. He's not here."

"I'm sorry, but we haven't seen him to-night," Julie said into the mouthpiece.

There was a pause on the line which crackled and hummed, then the woman said, "He'll be in. Will you ask him to call me at once? Take the number, please."

Julie memorized the number, said she would tell him the moment he came in, and hung up.

Hewart scowled.

"I wish that fella would keep away from here," he growled. "He's no good to anyone."

A few minutes later Harry breezed in. Julie waved to him.

"Hello," he said, corning over to her, "Don't tell me you're pleased to see me for once."

"There was a phone message for you a few minutes ago. A woman wants you to call her. She says it's urgent. Riverside 58845."

His smile faded and his greenish eyes hardened.

"Can I borrow the blower?"

She liked him like this. He was no longer flippant, and seeing him now she thought he looked hard and dangerous. She watched him dial the number, and noticed his hand was unsteady.

"Dana?" No one else in the room except Julie could hear what he was saying. "This is Harry. What's up?" He listened, and Julie saw his hand tighten on the telephone. "How long ago? Right. Keep your chimmy on. All right. No, stop flapping. It'll be all right. Yeah, yeah; so long." He hung up.

"Someone found you out?" Julie asked, watching him intently.

"Yes." He studied her for a moment. "Like to do me a favour?" He looked quickly over his shoulder, then slipped a small package done up in white tissue paper into her lap. "Hang on to this until tomorrow, will you? Keep it out of sight. And if anyone asks you if I've given you anything—not a word. O.K.?"

"I wouldn't do it for anyone else, but I'll do it for you," Julie said, and smiled.

"Good kid. How about coming out with me tomorrow? I'll buy you a lunch."

"Not tomorrow. I'm pretty booked up." Which wasn't true. "The day after, perhaps. You'll be in tomorrow night?"

"You bet. Keep that safe for me. "Bye now," and he went quickly to the door. As he opened it he came to an abrupt stop and took a step back.

Two men came in : big men in slouch hats and raincoats. With a sudden sinking feeling Julie recognized them. Police! She might have guessed that was why Harry had been so anxious to get rid of the package.

Harry was talking to the two police officers. He was smilingly at ease. The rest of the men and women in the café watched, not moving, silent and effacing. Detective Inspector Dawson, whom Julie knew by sight, jerked his head in the direction of Hewart's office. Harry shrugged and walked back down the gangway. He passed Julie without looking at her.

The moment they were out of sight the men and women in the café made a quick scramble for the exit. In a few seconds the café was empty.

Frightened, Julie grabbed up her bag and was about to put the package in it when she changed her mind. That was the first place they'd look, she told herself. She glanced quickly round the empty café, then pulled up her skirt and pushed the package down the top of her girdle.

The police officers weren't in Hewart's office for long. They came out with Harry, followed by Hewart, who was pale with rage.

The younger police officer walked down the gangway with Harry. They went out together.

Hewart and Dawson stood talking for a few moments, then wandered over to Julie.

Dawson raised his hat. He belonged to the old school and believed politeness paid.

"Good evening, miss. Do you know that young fellow Gleb?"

She looked at him insolently.

"I don't, and even if I did, I don't see what it has to do with you."

"Wasn't he talking to you just now?"

"He was buying cigarettes."

Dawson stared at her until she had to look away.

Was he? He didn't have a packet on him when I searched him. How do you account for that?"

Julie changed colour. That was a slip and a bad one. She didn't say anything.

"He didn't give you anything to look after, did he?"

She felt a cold little shiver run up her spine, but she forced herself to meet his inquiring eyes.

"He didn't."

"Would you let me examine your bag?"

"You haven't any right to look in my bag," she flared. "but if it'll satisfy you, you can." She pushed the bag towards him, but he didn't touch it."

"That's all right, miss. I won't bother." He glanced at Hewart. "Well, so long, Sam. See you again one of these days." His eyes travelled around the empty café and he concealed a smile. "Sorry to have spoiled your trade. Your customers are a little sensitive it seems."

"So long," Hewart said, his eyes hard.

Dawson raised his hat to Julie.

"I don't know any other fellow who could get a girl into trouble faster than Web," he said. "There may be others, but I doubt it. Good night."

When he had gone, Hewart gave Julie an ugly look.

"What's the idea?" he demanded roughly. "What the devil are you playing at?"

Julie raised her eyebrows.

"I don't know what you mean, I'm sure."

"I'll have a word with you when we've shut," Hewart said, and walked into his office, slamming the door behind him.

Julie was putting on her hat before the chipped mirror that hung on the store-room wall when Hewart came in. They were now alone in the café; the rest of the staff had gone.

"What did Gleb give you?" Hewart demanded, coming to the point with his usual bluntness.

Hewart's aggressive tone and cold searching eyes warned Julie to be cautious.

"You heard what I told Dawson, didn't you?" she snapped. "He didn't give me anything."

Hewart said, "I heard what you told Dawson all right." He came close to her. "If you can't lie better than that you'd better keep your mouth shut. Dawson knew you were up to something. If he didn't guess Gleb had given you the rings, he knew something was on

between you two."

Rings? Julie felt herself go white under her make-up. "I—I don't know what you're talking about."

"Now, look, kid," Hewart said, seeing the frightened expression in her eyes and softening towards her. He was fond of Julie, and didn't want any trouble with her. "So far you've been a damned smart girl; but you're not being smart now. Gleb works outside our circle. We don't do things for him, and he doesn't do things for us, see? You didn't know that. I should have given you the tip. All right, I'm not blaming you, don't think that. He's too smooth. No one ever gets anything out of his deals."

"I tell you he didn't give me anything," Julie said, her heart beating rapidly. If she once admitted she had received stolen rings from Harry, she would be at Hewart's mercy. What a fool she had been to have taken the package. She might have guessed it was stolen property. She was furious with herself for being so green.

Hewart studied her. His hatchet face was hardened.

"Listen, this evening a society woman left three diamond rings worth a thousand quid on her dressing-table for a couple of seconds, no more, and they vanished. A couple of seconds, see? That's Gleb : split-second timing and specializes in bedrooms. That's his line. Dawson knows all about him; so do I. He came here directly after the robbery, and it's my guess the woman who "phoned tipped him the police were after him and he dumped the loot on to you. That's another of his pet tricks. Never mind if he gets anyone into trouble so long as he saves his own dirty hide. Now, look, Julie, Gleb is rank poison. I don't like a fella who brings the cops here. I have no time for him, and I want those rings."

Julie snatched up her hat and coat and moved quickly to the door, but Hewart stepped in front of her.

"Now, wait a minute," he said, an ugly glint in his eyes.

"I don't know anything about the rings. Would you please mind out of the way, Mr. Hewart? I want to go home."

"Not just yet. I'm being patient with you, Julie, because I like you. But you're making a damn fool of yourself over this fella. I don't miss much that goes on here. I've seen you talking to him and putting on airs. You're trying to hook him, aren't you? You watch out. Gleb knows all about women; he specializes in them. You leave him alone. You can get plenty of other fellas without taking on a rat like Gleb. He never did any girl any good."

"Oh!" Julie exclaimed furiously. "How—how dare you talk to me like that ! Get out of my way!"

"I'm warning you," Hewart said, losing patience. "You're not leaving here unless you hand over those rings, and if I have to take

‘em from you, you’ll get the sack.”

“You’re not having them, and I don’t want your rotten job! I can always get another ! I’m not scared of you, you old bully!”

Seeing her white, furious little face, her determined attitude and her clenched fists, Hewart was struck with admiration. He burst out laughing.

“Come on, Julie, don’t be a little fool. You’ve got a lot of nerve, and you and me can get on well together. Hand over those rings, and we’ll forget the whole business.”

“I tell you I don’t know what you’re talking about. I haven’t the rings, and if I had I wouldn’t give them to you!” Julie snapped, and darted past him.

Hewart caught hold of her, and holding her wrists in one hand he ran his other hand over her body.

“How dare you!” Julie stormed, struggling to break his hold. “Let me go or I’ll scream the place down.”

“Scream away,” Hewart panted. His face was congested. “If the bogies come I’ll tell ‘em Gleb gave you the rings and you’ll be for it. Stand still and stop struggling. You’ve got ‘em on you—I know.” His questing fingers felt the little bulge of the package. “AM Here they are. Now stop fighting. It won’t get you anywhere.”

But Julie struggled and kicked. Her toeless shoes made no impression on Hewart’s thick legs and she couldn’t get her; hands free. As he began to pull up her skirt, she let out squeal of outraged fury.

“Well, I am surprised at you, Sam,” Harry said as he pushed’ open the door. “You could get six months for half what you’re doing.”

Hewart released Julie as if she had suddenly become red hot. Harry leaned against the doorway, his hat cocked rakishly over one eye, his hands in his pockets, a hard, cynical expression in his eyes.

“How did you get in here?” Hewart asked feebly. He was frightened, not liking the look Harry gave him. There was a half-concealed threat in the clenched fists hidden in the pockets.

Julie staggered away from Hewart; her face was white, and her eyes blazing with fury.

“You rotten swine! How dare you touch me !” She rounded on Harry. “It’s all your fault! Hit him! Did you see what he was doing to me? Hit him! Make him pay for it!”

Harry regarded her with frank admiration. He liked to see a girl in a rage, and Julie’s rage was a real pippin, he thought. “Keep your hair on, sweetheart,” he said with a grin. “You wouldn’t want me to hit an old man, now, would you? You come along home with me. He didn’t do you any harm.”

“I’ll teach him to put his dirty paws on me !” Julie screamed, and snatched up a four pound jar of honey and threw it at Hewart. The jar

caught him in the middle of his chest and sent him reeling back. As she turned for another missile, Harry, gasping with laughter, caught hold of her and bundled her out of the room.

“Lock yourself in, Sam!” he shouted. “I can’t hold her for long, and she’s after your blood!”

The door hastily slammed and the key turned.

Julie, panting with rage, wrenched free and hammered on the door.

“Let me in, you dirty old goat! I haven’t finished with you yet. I’ll kill you for this!”

“You get out!” Hewart shouted through the door panels. “You’re sacked, see? I don’t want to see you again. You hop it or I’ll call the police.”

“I’ll give you in charge!” Julie screamed back. “I’ll have you up for assault, you —— —! ! You won’t get away with this! Don’t you think you will!”

“Come on, Julie,” Harry said persuasively, but he kept at a safe distance. “Leave the old geezer alone. You’ve given him a fright, and he won’t try that on again.”

She turned on him.

“You’ve lost me my job!” she exclaimed. “It’s all very well for you to stand there grinning. What am I going to do now?”

Harry was thinking, “I said something would turn up, and it has. It couldn’t have worked out better.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Julie demanded, calming down. She suddenly realized what it would mean not to work at the café again. To find another job worth twelve pounds a week would be impossible. “Oh! Damn you! I wish I’d never seen you. I wish I hadn’t helped you.”

“Now don’t get excited. Come on. We’ll talk this over. I have a car outside. I’ll take you home.”

She went with him because she didn’t know what else to do. If she had been alone she would have gone back to Hewart and apologized. But Harry pushed her along, his hand on her elbow. He had got her away from Hewart, and he had no intention of letting her get back again.

“Don’t you worry,” he said, pausing beside a big Chrysler car, parked under a street light. Julie noticed it had “Hackney Carriage” number plates. “In you get. Where do you live?” keep the car on the road without the cops asking me where I get the petrol from.”

“Is this your car?” she asked, startled.

“Course it is. The plates don’t mean anything except I can.”

She looked at the long, glittering bonnet and the big headlights. “If he can afford to run a car like this,” she thought, “maybe he has money. He must have. I’ll see what I can get out of him.”

“Wake up, dreamy. Where do you live?” he asked, and pushed her into the car.

“Fulham Palace Road,” she said, settling herself on the broad, comfortable seat.

“What have you got—rooms?” He got in beside her, and trod on the starter.

“It’s a self-contained flat.”

“Share it with anyone?”

“No. You want to know a lot, don’t you?”

“A proper Nosey Parker I am,” he returned with a laugh, and drove rapidly through the deserted streets. Neither of them said anything until they stopped outside her flat, then he said, “This it? Right. Let’s go in. I could do with a cup of tea.”

“You’re not coming in and you’re not having any tea,” Julie snapped. “And if you want those rings back you’ll have to pay for them.”

He twisted round to look at her. He was smiling, but his eyes had hardened.

“But I want to talk to you. We can’t talk here. Now, be nice and invite me in.”

“I’m not in the habit of inviting men into my flat at this hour. I want fifty pounds for the rings. You won’t get them until you give me the money.”

He whistled softly under his breath.

“Have a heart, kid. Fifty quid! Why, the damn things aren’t worth that.”

“They’re worth a thousand, and you know it. Bring the money tomorrow morning or I’ll sell them.” She jerked open the car door, ran up the steps, opened the door before he could move.

“Hey Julie!” he shouted.

“Tomorrow morning or you won’t see them again,” she said triumphantly, and slammed the door.

IV

Harry waited long enough to see a light flash up in a room on the ground floor then, smiling to himself, he started the car and drove rapidly down the street. He hadn't far to go. He knew the district well, and knew there was an all-night garage close by. He left the car there and walked back to Julie's flat.

For some minutes he stood outside, looking up and down the street. It was after three o'clock in the morning and only a stray cat attracted his attention. Then, moving with confident ease, he swung himself over the iron railings guarding the basement of the house, caught hold of a stack pipe and climbed on to Julie's window-sill. He pushed up the window and stepped into the room and closed the window. He had moved with extraordinary speed and quietness. The whole manoeuvre did not take more than a few seconds.

He pushed aside the curtain. The room in which he found himself was large and shabbily furnished and without much comfort. There was a lamp by the bed that cast a pink glow over the harsh colour of the wallpaper and furnishings.

Across the room was a door that stood half open. The sound of running water told him it was the bathroom. He could hear Julie humming to herself as she prepared for bed, and he grinned to himself. He took off his hat and coat, sat down in an arm-chair and lit a cigarette.

After a few minutes Julie came into the bedroom. She had on a pair of emerald-green pyjamas that set off her figure admirably, and her hair was loose to her shoulders. She came to an abrupt standstill when she saw him sitting there, and turned white, then red.

"Hello, remember me?" he said casually. "Get into bed, Julie. I want to talk to you."

She looked wildly round the room, her eyes went to the dressing-table, and she made a quick dash. But Harry was there first. He picked up the two diamond rings she had half-concealed under her handbag as she reached him.

"Put them down!" she whispered furiously.

Instead he slipped them into his pocket.

"Sorry, kid, they're too important to fool with," he said gently. "I want to talk to you. Don't get angry. Let's be matey, Julie. Get me a cup of tea and let's talk."

"You devil!" she exclaimed furiously. "I did all that for you and now you're not going to pay me. You rotten stinker!"

"Who said I wasn't going to pay you? You want a job, don't you? Well, I've got a damned good one for you. Honest, I'm not fooling."

"What kind of job?"

"Get me some tea and take that scowl off your face," he said.

"Go on, Julie, I can't talk until I've had some tea."

"You're the limit, Harry," she said, weakening. "Well, I suppose I'll have to make you tea. I won't be long."

He finished his cigarette while she made the tea.

"It's just the way you handle 'em," he told himself. "I reckon I handled her beautifully. In a little while I'll have her just where I want her."

She returned to the bedroom, set the tray on the table and poured out the tea.

"What about this job?" she demanded, as she handed him a cup. "And don't forget you owe me fifty pounds."

"What did Sam pay you?"

"Twelve pounds a week."

He whistled softly.

"You won't get that again in a hurry unless . . ." He paused, went on : "You wouldn't have to be too fussy what you did, Julie, and there may be risks."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. How long have you been with Sam?"

"Oh, six months."

"And before that?"

"In a twopenny library."

"And before that?"

"I worked in a factory," Julie said, frowning at the memory.

"So you've only been in the money for six months?"

"Yes, and I'm not going to get out of it if I can help it." Her eyes hardened. "Until now I've never had any fun. Do you think you could find me anything good?"

"I know I can."

He sipped his tea while he studied her.

"I don't believe you have a job for me at all," she said, seeing him hesitate. "You're just leading me up the garden path. If you are . . . you'll be sorry! There's nothing to stop me seeing Dawson and telling him about those rings, is there?"

Harry nearly dropped his cup. A threat like that wasn't funny, even if she were bluffing, and he didn't think she was.

"Now wait a minute, Julie. You be careful what you're saying. There's a word for a girl who squeals to the police and it's an ugly one."

"Words don't hurt me," Julie retorted, tossing her head. "What about this job?"

"One of the big money-making jobs at the moment is being a lady's

maid," he began cautiously. "A friend of mine runs a domestic agency. She has a vacancy and could fix you up."

Julie stiffened, and stared at him.

"Are you suggesting I'm to become a servant?" she asked.

"Now, do relax, Julie. You're forever getting on your hind legs. You don't care how you earn money so long as it's big money, do you? What's wrong in being a maid? After all, you worked in a café. You're not all that proud, are you? This is a good job. You'll live in a luxury flat, have time off, good food and money . . ."

"But a maid . . ." She got up and began to pace up and down. Harry watched her pyjama'd figure, aware that his mind was wandering from business. "No, I really can't. Hewart paid me twelve pounds a week. I can't live on less and I'm not going to. A maid doesn't get anything like that."

"This one does," Harry said with a grin. "This one is special. What do you say to fifteen quid a week and a fifty pound bonus at the end of the job?"

"But no one would pay that," she exclaimed, turning to stare at him.

"Now look, don't be inquisitive." There was a slight edge to his voice. "I want you to make a little easy money and not to know too much about the way you're making it. Are you smart enough to understand that?"

"Oh, I see." She was instantly suspicious. "It's some kind of racket."

"Sort of but if you don't know what it's all about then you won't get into trouble, will you?"

"The same old argument," she thought, a little wearily.

"He's right, of course. Hewart used it. See nothing, know nothing and you'll be all right. Well, it's worked up to now."

"All you have to do is to work at a certain place for a month or so," Harry went on. "You'll get three quid a week and all found. I'll arrange for you to get twelve quid in addition, and at the end of the job a fifty-quid bonus. What's more I'll give you a tenner now if you'll close with the deal."

"But, Harry, I'd like to think about it . . ."

"All right, tell me tomorrow. Sleep on it. Fifteen quid week and a fifty-pound bonus. That's not to be sneezed at."

"You're not pulling my leg, are you?" she asked, suddenly suspicious again. "You could walk out of here and leave me flat. I wasn't born yesterday. I might never see you again. And then what should I do?"

He levered himself out of his chair, went over to sit beside her on the bed.

"I'll tell you a secret," he said, and pulled her to him. Whispering in her ear, he said, "I'm not going to leave you to-night."

She pulled away and jumped to her feet.

“Oh, no! I’m not having any of that. I’m not that easy. No, you get out. I’ll chance seeing you again.”

He laughed at her.

“You don’t know your own mind, do you? First I’m to stay, then I’m to go. Well, I’m going to make up your mind for you.”

She made a hasty grab at her dressing-gown, but he caught her in his arms.

“No!” she whispered, struggling. “Stop it, Harry! You mustn’t!”

His mouth came down on hers. For a moment she continued to struggle, then her arms went round his neck.

“Damn you!” she said against his mouth, and then, “Hold me tighter.”

V

The morning sunlight came through the dowdy chintz curtains. A milkman shouted angrily to his horse and then set down his bottles with a penetrating clatter. Further up the road the postman rapped sharply on a door.

Julie stirred, stretched, yawned. Through the half-open bathroom door came the sound of running water. She moved her legs under the sheet and sighed contentedly.

"Got all you want, Harry?" she called sleepily.

"I'll want some tea in a moment. Aren't you out of bed yet?"

"I'm just getting up," Julie said, turned over and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

"I bet." Harry came to the door. He had a towel round his middle and she thought he looked like a boxer. He was muscular, hard and tanned. "Come on out before I throw you out."

"I'm coming," Julie yawned, threw off the bedclothes. "It's not nine yet."

"I've got a lot to do this morning," Harry said, and disappeared into the bathroom.

She went into the kitchen and put on the kettle.

"It's a funny thing," she thought, "but it seems as if he's always been here; as if this has always been part of my life. But I do wish he wouldn't be so evasive."

They had talked during the night, and Julie had tried to find out something about his everyday life, what he thought, what he did with himself, but she came up against a flippant barrier that turned anything serious into a joke.

Harry was dressed when she returned with the tea.

"Harry . . . those rings. I've been worrying. You can't get away with that kind of thing for long. You know that."

He took the cup of tea she gave him and laughed.

"For goodness' sake don't start worrying about me. You worry about yourself if you have to worry at all."

"But I do worry about you."

"Now look; I have only a few years on this earth—another forty with luck," he said. "What's forty years? Nothing, and then—the worms, the dark and the cold. All right then, I'm going to enjoy myself while I can. I can't do that without money. Money's power; it's fun, food and drink, cigarettes and love. Money's a motor car, petrol, clothes and shoes. It's a night out at the White City dog track; it's a game of poker and a seat at the theatre. It's everything you can think of. I've tried working for a living, but it didn't come off. I've been in

the war. I've done my little bit, and now I'm going to have a good time. I don't care how I get hold of money so long as I get it. I help myself. That's all there's to it."

"But what's the good of it all if you spend ten years in jail?" Julie demanded, hoping he could give her a satisfactory answer, since his philosophy matched hers.

"You have to be smart. I've kept out of jail for three years and I'm keeping out of it."

"If it hadn't been for me you would have been in jail by now," she reminded him.

"Don't you believe it. There's always someone around. You'd be surprised. If you hadn't taken those rings I'd've got rid of them some other way. It's happened before."

This annoyed and hurt Julie. She wanted to think she had saved him from prison at a considerable risk to herself.

"And do you always make love to the woman who's helped you? Is that your idea of a reward?" she asked tartly.

"You're a funny kid." He laughed at her. "I'm fussy who I make love to. You'll find that out one of these days."

She had never suffered from jealousy before, but now the thought of any other woman knowing him as intimately as she did tormented her.

"Harry . . . who's that woman, Dana, who rang you?"

"My mother," he said promptly, stretched out his legs. "She's a wonderful old thing : lavender and old lace, or is it arsenic? Anyway, you'd love her."

"I'm not going to be treated like this," Julie exclaimed, stamping her feet. "You've got to stop this silly pose with me. Who is she? I want to know."

He pulled a face, then laughed again.

"Don't bully me, Julie. She's just a girl I know. Nothing to get excited about. She isn't half as pretty as you, and she means nothing to me."

"How did she know the police were looking for you?"

"She's clairvoyant. Saw old Dawson in the tea leaves."

"Are you going to stop playing the fool and tell me or aren't you?" Julie demanded, thoroughly angry now.

"Mind your own business," he said, and smiled at her, but she was quick to see the sudden hard look in his eyes.

There was a long pause while they looked at each other. Julie's eyes were the first to give ground. She could see it was useless to press him and she decided to change her tactics.

right, don't tell me if you want to make a mystery of it," she said, trying to sound indifferent. "Have some more tea?"

He handed her his cup, lit another cigarette and yawned.

"I'll have to be off in a moment," he said, glancing at his watch.

She felt uneasy again. He could walk out of her flat and she might never see him again.

"Where do you live, Harry?" she asked, as she poured out the tea.

"Ten Downing Street. I have a little flat on the top floor. It's pretty cosy because I share the Prime Minister's butler."

It was no use, she decided, alarmed and angry. Under his flippant pose was a mercurial character that refused to be pinned down. She mustn't be too possessive. Later, perhaps, when they knew each other better, she might gain his confidence.

She said lightly : "Are you ever serious?"

"What do I want to be serious for? Eat, drink and make money and love for tomorrow the worms will have you. I haven't time to be serious. Having fun is a full-time job."

"So I'm not even to know where you live?"

"The woman's living with him," she thought. "That's why he won't tell me."

"At times you positively shine, Julie."

"All right, be mysterious," she said crossly, and turned away. The less you know about me the better," he returned, and picked up his coat. "Well, I'm off. How about that job, Julie?"

"Well, all right," she said reluctantly. "I suppose I'd better do it. All I have to do is to be a maid; nothing else?"

He grinned.

"That's all. Of course, you'll keep your eyes open."

She knew at once then that she was to be the inside plant for a robbery. For a moment she hesitated, and Harry, seeing her hesitate, took out two five-pound notes.

"I promised you something in advance. Here, put those in your pocket."

She hesitated no longer. What she didn't know about she couldn't get into trouble about. She could look after herself. She took the money.

"What do I do?"

"Here." He handed her a card. "Go to this address. Ask for Mrs. French and tell her I sent you. She knows all about it and will tell you what to do. O.K.?"

"And there's no risk? I mean I shan't get into trouble?"

"Not a chance," he returned breezily. "All you have to do is to act like a maid. Simple, isn't it?"

"And keep my eyes open," she said, watching him. He grinned.

"That's the idea. Well, so long, Julie."

"When am I going to see you again?"

“Soon. I’ve got a lot of things on at the moment. I’ll get in touch with you.”

“Just like a man. Get what you want, then cool off,” Julie said angrily.

He pulled her to him and kissed her.

“If you want me urgently give Mrs. French a message. I’ll be out of Town for a day or so, but she’ll know where she can get in touch with me. All right?”

She looked up at him.

“It’ll have to be.”

He kissed her, gave her a little hug, and left her. She went to the window and watched him walk quickly down the street.

“Planning a robbery,” she thought. “And I’m to find out the details. Well, the money’s all right. If I don’t have anything to do with the actual robbery I can’t get into trouble.” She looked at the two five-pound notes and smiled. “The money’s fine.”

VI

Julie found Mrs. French's Domestic Agency was over an antique bookseller's shop in Mayfair Street. She went into the dimly lit lobby. The bookseller's door was on her right, in front of her was a flight of stone stairs, and under the stairs was the lift.

A blonde woman, holding a pekinese dog under her arm, stood in the doorway. She looked at Julie without interest, then shifted her heavily shaded eyes back to the street. A man paused in his stride, looked at her, saw Julie and continued on his way. The blonde woman didn't care. The man had already twice passed the doorway. Obviously he was the type who took time to make up his mind. He would be back again.

Julie entered the lobby, glanced back at the blonde woman and wrinkled her nose. She would never come to that, she told herself.

As she looked round she became aware of a tall, bony man peering at her through the glass panel of the door leading to the bookseller's shop. He stood very still, his head on one side and surveyed her with intent eyes. He was old and dried up, and his thick, white hair needed a trim. His scrutiny made her feel uncomfortable and she hurriedly ran up the stairs, knowing he would stare at her legs until she was out of sight.

A door marked "*Mrs. French. Domestic Agency. Enquiries.*" faced her at the head of the stairs; she pushed it open, entered a small, well-furnished room, full of flowers and sunshine.

A girl was typing by the window. She was smart, polished and sophisticated. Her auburn hair was done in an elaborate up-sweep with not a hair out of place. Her white linen dress with its smart red buttons and belt fitted her without a wrinkle. She looked as if she had been taken carefully from a box lined with cellophane and placed with equal care on her chair not a moment before. Julie regarded her with envious interest.

The girl glanced up, her scarlet nails still flashing over the typewriter's keys. Seeing Julie, she stopped typing and with an irritable frown pushed back her chair and came over to the counter that divided the room.

She had the easy, graceful carriage of a mannequin and she was tall. She made Julie feel shabby and somehow a little cheap, and that immediately put Julie on the offensive.

"Did you want anything?" the girl asked abruptly and eyed Julie with scarcely concealed contempt. She had a low, husky voice that seemed familiar to Julie.

"Mr. Gleb told me to ask for Mrs. French," she said awkwardly.

“Oh, I see.” The girl’s mouth tightened. “You’re Julie Holland, I suppose? Well, sit down. You’ll have to wait. My mother’s busy at the moment,” and she turned and went back to her typing.

Feeling snubbed and hating the girl, Julie sat down. There followed a long wait. The only sound in the office was the whirr of the typewriter and the sharp ping of the bell at the end of each line. She studied the girl. “They must pay well here.” she thought, “that frock has a marvellous cut, and she’s wearing nylons, too. I’d like a frock like that. I’d look much nicer than she does.”

The girl got up suddenly, swept up a number of papers from her desk, and went into the inner office. After another wait, she came out, jerked her head at Julie.

“Go in. She’s free now.”

Mrs. French sat at a big desk near the window. She wore unrelieved black and, seeing her, like an unwanted relative at a funeral, Julie was startled. Long jet ear-rings swung backwards and forwards whenever she moved her head. She had none of her daughter’s prettiness, but there was a marked resemblance about the determined mouth and chin.

She seemed to know all about Julie and came to the point with startling suddenness.

“Gleb’s told me about you. The job’s simple enough if you use your brains. You don’t look a fool.” And as Julie continued to stand before her desk, she waved impatiently to a chair. “Sit down, sit down.” Her voice was deep and harsh. “You will go this afternoon to 97, Park Way. Do you know where the Albert Hall is? Well, Park Way is just by it. You can’t miss it. It’s big and ugly enough. Your new employer will be Mrs. Howard Wesley. You are to be her personal maid. You’ll have to look after her things, tidy up when she’s finished dressing, answer the door, serve cocktails, arrange flowers and take telephone messages. It’s an easy job as far as the work’s concerned. The permanent staff of the building does all the rest of the work and the meals are sent up from the restaurant. Mrs. Wesley will pay you three pounds a week and all found. You’re to come here every Saturday afternoon for your additional pay. Do you understand all that?”

Julie said, “Yes.”

There was something about Mrs. French that made her uneasy : a feeling you have in the dark when you hear a sudden, mysterious sound and you think something horrible is going to jump out on you.

“Your uniform is over there—in that parcel,” Mrs. French went on, and touched her ear-rings. They seemed to give her a secret satisfaction for she smiled. “If it doesn’t fit you, alter it, but I think it’ll be all right. For goodness’ sake don’t look shoddy. Mrs. Wesley has high standards. And here are your references.” She pushed two

envelopes across the desk. "Study them. Mrs. Wesley isn't likely to be too particular, but you never know. One of them is from a doctor and the other a clergyman. I've been to a lot of trouble to get them and they cost me money, so don't lose them."

"Thank you," Julie said, bewildered. She put the two envelopes in her bag.

"Well, you know what you have to do," Mrs. French went on. "I'd better tell you something about the Wesleys. You'll find out about them quick enough, but you may as well be on your guard. Howard Wesley, the husband, is the senior partner of Wesley-Benton, the aircraft designers. The factory is near Northolt airfield. Wesley goes there every day. You may have read about him. He's blind : won the V.C. bringing in a burning bomber. He saved the crew or something like that. I forget the details. Anyway, he's enormously rich—and blind." She picked up a pencil and began to draw neat little circles on the blotting paper. "Mrs. Wesley, before her marriage, was Blanche Turrell, the musical comedy actress," she went on. "You've probably seen her. Most people have. She drinks like a camel. That's why she's given up stage work. Wesley's always been crazy about her, but she doesn't give two hoots for anyone but herself. She married Wesley for his money and leads him a hell of a life, so I hear. Her temper's vicious, her nature's mean and she has the morals of an alley cat." She thought for a moment, added, "Oh, yes, she's a first-class bitch as well."

"I see," Julie said, startled.

"You'll have trouble with her," Mrs. French went on. "Your work is easy enough, but your dealings with Mrs. Wesley won't be. That's why we're paying you good money. You'll earn it, all right; don't think you're in for a soft job." She stared at Julie, a satisfied expression in her eyes. "As far as I know she hasn't kept a maid longer than three weeks, but it is part of your job to stick it out until I tell you. If you quit before we're ready you'll lose the fifty pounds. Understand?"

"Before you're ready for what?" Julie asked sharply.

"You'll be told when we want you to know," Mrs. French said. "Your immediate job is to get established at Park Way. You're satisfied with the money we're paying you, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes," Julie said. "The money's all right."

"Be satisfied then, and don't ask questions." Mrs. French opened a drawer, took out a cash box and counted out twelve one-pound notes. "Take this. Come in next Saturday and there'll be another twelve pounds for you. You play along with us and we'll look after you, but step out of turn and you'll regret it." She eyed Julie, went on in her rasping voice. "Now get off and take that muck off your face. You're supposed to be a servant, not a movie star."

"Yes," Julie said, hating her. She put the money in her bag.

"And watch your temper. You'll need all your control when Mrs. Wesley starts on you. When she's drunk, she's rotten; remember that. You can't be too careful."

"I see," Julie said.

"Right, get off now, and tell Dana I want her as you go out." Julie was picking up the parcel containing her uniform when Mrs. French said this and nearly dropped the parcel.

Dana! So this was the girl who had telephoned Harry and had warned him the police were looking for him. She remembered what Harry had said about her : *She isn't as pretty as you, so you don't have to worry about her.* Wasn't she? She had everything : poise, prettiness, clothes and immaculate neatness. "How could he lie like that?" she thought, furious and dismayed. "He tried to make out she meant nothing to him. A girl like that . . ."

"What are you waiting for?" Mrs. French demanded. "You know what to do, don't you?"

"Yes," Julie said, and went into the outer office.

Dana was speaking into the telephone, her back turned to Julie.

"She's in there now," she was saying. "Yes, she looks all right as far as she goes——" She looked over her shoulder, saw Julie and stopped speaking.

"Mrs. French wants you," Julie said, aware that her voice was shaky. She went out of the office, closed the door and stood listening.

She heard Dana's voice clearly through the glass panel of the door.

"Just this moment gone," she was saying. "A bit of a slut I'd say, but if she does the job . . . what's that? Well, I'm not so sure. Oh, of course, they all want money. That's all they think about. All right. Let's talk about it to-night."

Who was she talking to? Julie wondered, her face burning. Not Harry. No, she wouldn't believe Harry would stand for her being called a slut. She wanted to rush into the office and slap Dana's face. Then a sudden feeling that she was being watched made her turn. Mrs. French was standing in the doorway that led from her office into the passage. The sunlight coming through the landing window caught the jet ear-rings and made them sparkle. Mrs. French didn't move nor speak. She looked coldly menacing, like a waxworks in the Chamber of Horrors. Julie forgot her anger, backed to the head of the stairs.

"I wasn't listening," she said breathlessly.

Mrs. French continued to regard her with stony eyes. The ear-rings continued to flash in the sunlight.

Julie turned and ran down the stairs. Just round the bend of the staircase she nearly collided with the blonde woman who was coming up the stairs. The man, whom Julie had seen in the street, was

following her. He didn't look at Julie, but stared at the stairs, red faced.

In the lobby the thin, bony man stared at her through the glass panel of the bookseller's door. He was still watching her as she ran down the stone steps into the heat and bustle of Mayfair Street.

CHAPTER TWO

A BLONDE woman in a silk wrap over an oyster-coloured nightdress jerked open the front door of 97, Park Way and demanded furiously : "What do you want; calling at this hour? Didn't they tell you I haven't a maid?" Her pretty, doll-like face was puffy with sleep, and she seemed to have just got out of bed.

"I'm sorry if I have disturbed you," Julie was startled and embarrassed. The woman made no attempt to conceal her rage. "I was sent by Mrs. French. I—I understood you were expecting me."

"Then for goodness' sake come in," Blanche Wesley said. "I've been without anyone for days. It's really monstrous how I'm treated."

She slouched into the hall lounge. Julie closed the front door and followed her.

"I can't talk to you until I've had some coffee," Blanche went on, and ran her little claw-like fingers through her blonde curls. "Now you are here—do make yourself useful. The kitchen's through there. Just poke around until you find everything. Please don't ask a lot of silly questions. I have a splitting headache. Just get me some coffee. I'll be in the end room down the passage." She stared at Julie; "Why, you're quite pretty. What a pleasant change. I'm so tired of being surrounded by ugly faces. I can never understand why the working classes are so hideous. But do run along. You can make coffee, I suppose, or can't you?"

"Oh, yes," Julie said, and smiled brightly.

Blanche winced.

"That's lovely, but don't grin at me, please. My nerves simply won't stand it." She frowned down at her quilted satin slippers, went on, "I think it would be nice if you said "madam" when you speak to me. Yes, I think I should like that. It shouldn't be difficult, or do you think it will?"

"No, madam," Julie said. She turned scarlet, and her smile vanished.

"Are you angry?" The pencilled eyebrows lifted. "Have I said anything to annoy you? You've turned the colour of a beetroot; so unbecoming I always think."

"Oh, no, madam," Julie said, and behind her back her fists clenched tightly.

"I probably will, sooner or later," Blanche said, with evident satisfaction. "Mr. Wesley tells me I am so tactless with menials. I suppose I am, but I do think if one pays good wages one should be able to say what one thinks."

Julie kept silent. The doll-like face, the enchanting little body, the golden curls that reminded her of a halo, fascinated her.

"Well, do stop gaping at me," Blanche said, frowning. "Of course, I'm used to people staring, but I do think it's a little much when I feel like the wrath of God."

"I'm sorry, madam," Julie tried to look away, but there was something so bizarre about this woman that she couldn't take her eyes off her for more than a few seconds.

"I feel positively ill this morning," Blanche went on. She pressed her fingers to her temples. "And no one cares a damn if I'm dying." Then, with a sudden startling blaze-up of rage, she shouted; "For God's sake get that coffee and stop gaping at me as if I were a blue-bottomed baboon !"

"I'm sorry, madam." Julie backed away. "I'll get it at once." She went into the kitchen and hurriedly closed the door. "Well, I was warned," she said to herself, "but I didn't think she'd be quite like this. Phew ! I'll have to watch my step if I'm to keep this job for long."

While she waited for the water to boil, she hurriedly slipped off her frock, opened the parcel containing her uniform and put it on.

"Perhaps she'll be pleased if I wear my uniform," she thought. "At least, it'll show her I know my place," and she giggled.

Blanche's room was ablaze with light when Julie entered carrying a tray. There was a strong smell of brandy and stale perfume in the room and the air was thick and stuffy. Although it was past three in the afternoon the curtains were still drawn, and no windows appeared to be open.

Blanche was wandering about amid overwhelming luxury and confusion. The walls of the room were covered with pale blue quilting. Arm-chairs, a quilted chaise-longue and a blue and white leather *pouf* were dotted about on the thick, white carpet. The ornate dressing-table was covered with spilt powder, oozing tubes of grease paint, and overturned bottles. Clothes lay about the floor, on the chairs, and over the foot of the bed. Shoes lay in corners where they had been carelessly thrown. A straw hat, almost the size of a sunshade, hung from one of the electric light brackets.

"What a time you've been," Blanche said, crossly. "You'll have to be a little quicker than this if we're to get along together." She peered at Julie, went on, "Oh, you've changed. Why, you look quite nice. What a pretty uniform." She pointed to a bedside table. "Put the tray down and leave me. Perhaps you'd like to tidy the bathroom, then we'll have a talk. It's through there. I'll be ready for you in a minute or so."

The bathroom made Julie envious. There was a shower cabinet, a sunken bath, a dressing-table, a massage machine, a Turkish bath cabinet, and a hair dryer : everything an idle, spoilt woman could

wish for. And, like the bedroom, this room was also in confusion. The bath hadn't been emptied. A towel floated on the milky water. Powder was scattered over the floor, and bath salt crystals crunched under Julie's shoes as she moved about, picking up cleansing tissues and hand towels sticky with cold cream.

Working as quickly as she could, she tidied the room, emptied the bath, wrung out the towel and wiped over the floor with it.

Blanche was still pacing up and down when she returned to the bedroom. On the dressing-table, partly concealed by a powder bowl, was a tumbler half-full of brandy.

"There you are," Blanche said, and smiled. She looked brighter now and more amiable. Did I ask your name? I don't believe I did."

"Julie Holland, madam."

Blanche dropped in an arm-chair, closed her eyes for a moment, then looked up and gave Julie a long, searching stare.

"Did you say Mrs. French sent you? I never seem to remember anything these days."

"Yes, madam."

"Oh, well, I suppose you must be all right. You've got references, I suppose?"

Julie handed over the two envelopes.

"That woman's so efficient," Blanche said a little crossly as she ripped open the envelopes. She glanced at the references, tossed them on the dressing-table. "She told you the wages, I suppose?"

"Yes, madam."

"Well, you'd better consider yourself engaged." She leaned forward to peer into the mirror. "Well see how we get on together. That was very good coffee you made. So long as you keep the place tidy and help me when I want help that's all I shall expect from you. Your room's at the other end of the passage. It's a nice room. I believe in making people comfortable. You can begin at once?"

"Yes, madam."

Blanche picked up a comb and began to run it through her blonde curls.

"I shall be away to-night. I would like you to move in immediately. I don't like the flat left empty if I can help it. Do you think you can manage that, or don't you?"

"Yes, madam." Julie was getting tired of standing before this glamorous little doll.

"And you won't mind being left alone here for the night?" Julie showed her surprise.

"Oh, no, madam. I don't mind at all."

"How brave of you," Blanche said languidly. "I hate being alone here. Mr. Wesley has been in Paris for the past fortnight and I've been

terrified. You never know when someone's going to break in. There are so many burglaries these days and you do hear the oddest noises at night. I sometimes think the place is haunted. But I suppose you don't believe in ghosts?"

No, madam," Julie said firmly.

"It must be nice to have no imagination," Blanche said, patting her curls. "I'm so sensitive and nervous. There are times when I'm quite positive someone creeps up and down the passage. I suppose it's because I'm highly strung."

"Or tight," Julie thought, wanting to laugh. She said, "Shall I run your bath, madam?"

"I suppose you'd better. And then there's a bag to be packed. I shan't be back until tomorrow evening. I expect Mr. Wesley about the same time. There'll be plenty for you to do. All my things want tidying. I've had absolutely no one for days and everything gets in such a mess. I don't know why. Do be a nice girl and open that cupboard. That's right. You see each of my dresses has a number. It's on the hanger."

The room was fitted with three enormous cupboards with sliding doors. The cupboard that Julie opened contained two long rows of dresses, coats, frocks and evening gowns.

"Each dress has a hat, underwear, gloves and bag to go with it, and, of course, shoes," Blanche explained in a tired little voice. "It's my own system. Everything is numbered and it's simply a matter of keeping the numbers together. Do you think you can manage?"

"Oh, yes, madam."

"There's a safe over there. You can't see it. It's hidden behind the wall. I look after that myself. I keep my furs and jewellery in it. Now I think you'd better run my bath. I simply must catch the five-twenty and time's getting on." She added this as if it were Julie's fault.

While Blanche was in the bathroom Julie did her best to tidy the bedroom, and as she worked she wondered what she was going to do with herself that evening. She hadn't expected an evening to herself so soon. If she could only get hold of Harry they might go to a movie together. But how could she get in touch with him? The only hope was Mrs. French. Harry had said she would pass on a message. It was worth trying.

Getting Blanche off was a maddening and exhausting operation. Twice her suitcase had to be unpacked because she changed her mind about what she intended to take with her : then, when all seemed ready and Julie was about to telephone for a taxi, Blanche became fretful and decided not to go.

"I really don't think I can be bothered," she said, flopping into an arm-chair. Dressed and made up, she was startlingly beautiful : like a

painted, irresistibly attractive doll. "It's not as if I like the people. They are too frightful for words. And besides, I don't feel well. I won't go . . . that settles it. You'd better unpack before everything is creased."

At the best of times Julie loathed packing. She had packed, unpacked, repacked and unpacked again and again packed.

Each operation had been supervised by Blanche who had criticized, scolded, and made useless suggestions. Now she was telling her to unpack for the third time. She nearly lost her temper, and longed to throw the suitcase at Blanche, but she managed to control herself and with unsteady hands she once more began to empty the suitcase. When it was nearly unpacked, Blanche suddenly gave an exclamation and beat her hands together.

"What am I thinking about?" she cried in apparent anguish. "My poor Julie. Of course I must go. I was forgetting Buckie would be there. And I simply *must* see *him*. Do hurry and pack again. I'll miss the train if you don't hurry. I can't say how sorry I am to give you all this extra work."

Julie was at boiling point and near tears. She began to slam the various articles back into the suitcase.

"Oh, no, Julie, don't close it yet," Blanche went on as Julie was about to slam the lid shut. "It's not very well packed, is it? There was something . . . of course. I don't think I want that mauve thing. It's somewhere at the bottom. You know the thing I mean. It makes me look like death."

Julie could have strangled her. She snatched the mauve evening gown from the suitcase, disarranging everything as she did so. She looked so distressed and angry that Blanche decided to change her tactics.

"Would you like that gown, Julie?" she asked casually. "I don't want it and it seems a shame not to put it to some use, doesn't it?"

The bottom was knocked out of Julie's fury. She sat back on her heels and stared up at Blanche.

"I beg your pardon, madam?" she said, looked at the gown and touched it with caressing fingers.

"It is nice, isn't it?" Blanche said carelessly. "One of Hartnell's. But the colour makes me look like hell. I can't imagine why I bought it. Would you like it?"

"Me?" Julie said, her eyes lighting up. "Oh, yes, I would. Thank you madam."

Blanche smiled. It was a cruel little smile and when Julie saw it her heart sank.

"Well, I'll think about it," Blanche said. "Of course, I couldn't give it to you. It cost a hundred and fifty guineas or something like that. But I

might let you have it for twenty pounds.” Sick with disappointment Julie put the gown on the back of the chair, stooped to fasten the suitcase.

“And I don’t suppose you have twenty pounds to spend on a gown, or have you?” Blanche went on airily.

No, madam,” Julie said and turned away.

“What a pity. Oh, well, never mind. It would be absurd really for a girl of your class to wear it. You’d only get yourself laughed at. Perhaps I’ll advertise in *The Times*. I could do that, couldn’t I?”

Julie looked swiftly at her and caught a gleeful expression on Blanche’s face. It was gone in a moment, but Julie knew then that she was being deliberately baited.

“All right,” she thought, “have your fun, you filthy little cat. But you won’t catch me like that again.”

“It’s no use letting her get under your skin,” she told herself when Blanche had gone. “That’s what she is trying to do. Thank goodness I’m free of her for the next twenty-four hours. I don’t care what Harry does to her now. If I can help him put her rotten nose out of joint I’ll do it.”

She decided it would take her at least two hours of hard work to put the flat straight. It was now a quarter to five. She could be ready to meet Harry by seven if she could find him.

She didn’t want to ring Mrs. French’s agency, but there was no other alternative. After some hesitation she put the call through.

Dana answered.

“This is Julie Holland,” Julie said, stiffening when she recognized Dana’s husky voice. “I want to speak to Mr. Gleb. Can you give me his number?”

“Hold on,” Dana said. The telephone was put down with a sharp click. Julie heard her say, “It’s the Holland girl. She wants to speak to you.”

To Julie’s surprise, Harry’s voice floated over the line. “What’s up?” he asked sharply.

“Oh, nothing. It’s all right. I wanted to see you to-night. Mrs. Wesley has gone away and I’ve got the evening off. Can we meet about seven?”

“Sorry, kid.” He sounded irritable. “I’ve got a date.”

“But, Harry, surely we can meet. I don’t know when I’ll be free again. I’m all alone here and I’ve got nothing to do.”

“I’m catching a train to Manchester in twenty minutes,” he returned. “I’m sorry, but it’s something I can’t do anything about. I’ll see you when I get back. I haven’t a minute. So long,” and he hung up.

“Damn!” Julie thought. “Oh, damn! Well, you’re stuck. You have no one to talk to, no one to go out with and the whole evening on your

hands. What rotten luck to have found him so easily and we can't meet. He might have been nicer on the "phone. After all, we are lovers." Then, anxious to make excuses for him, she thought it must have been difficult for him with the Dana woman listening in.

Sometime later, lying in bed, she forgot her loneliness. Her room delighted her. It was as comfortably furnished as the other rooms in the flat and had a bathroom adjoining, a telephone, and a portable wireless by the bed.

Julie had been to her flat in Fulham Palace Road and had packed her bags and brought them to her new home. In her new luxurious surroundings she no longer felt neglected nor did she wish for company. The room, the hot bath, the wireless and the comfortable bed more than made up for the disappointment of not seeing Harry.

At eleven-thirty she turned off the wireless and settled down in bed. As she reached out to turn off the bedside lamp she heard a sound that made her pause. Somewhere in the flat a door closed softly. She frowned, aware of a sudden uneasiness, and she waited, listening. And while she waited in the silent little room she remembered what Blanche had said : *I hate being alone here. I'm sure it's haunted. There really are the oddest sounds at night.*

"She was trying to frighten me," Julie thought, and she reached once more for the light switch, but paused again as the curtains billowed out. "It's only the wind getting up," she reassured herself, but she continued to listen.

The flat was sound-proofed. She could hear nothing now except the steady ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and her own rapid heartbeat.

With an impatient shrug she turned off the light. But immediately the room was in darkness it became an object of frightening speculation. Was there someone in the flat? Had someone crept into the room? Was it the wind that moved the curtains or was it . . . ?

"This is ridiculous," she thought. "There's nothing in the flat that could possibly frighten me so long as I don't allow myself to be frightened."

And then she distinctly heard footsteps and she turned cold. There was no mistaking the sound : soft, stealthy footsteps that crept towards her door.

She reached for the bedside lamp and succeeded only in knocking it to the floor. It fell with a thud on the carpet and, leaning out of bed, her hair over her eyes, her heart pounding, she scrabbled feverishly for it. Then she became aware that in the darkness her door handle was turning and it flashed through her mind that she hadn't locked the door.

There was a light in the passage and as the door inched open the

light crept into the room. She drew back in the bed, crouched down, terrified. A ribbon of light fell across the floor creating menacing shadows. The door ceased to move and she could hear someone in the passage breathing softly.

She waited : too frightened to make a sound, suspended in terror.

Something white and indistinct but moving came round the edge of the door. The scream that had been boiling inside her like a hot, seething ball made a croaking sound through the room. The light went on. Blanche Wesley stood in the doorway. In the shaded light she looked like a mischievous, gleeful little gnome.

Julie screamed again.

“Did I disturb you?” Blanche asked innocently. “I meant to be so quiet and just have a peep at you to see if you were comfortable.” The forget-me-not blue eyes never left Julie’s panic-stricken face. “I changed my mind and caught the last train home. I’m afraid I frightened you.” The gleeful smile widened. “But you did say you weren’t nervous, didn’t you, or were you boasting?” She turned off the light and said out of the darkness, “Good night, Julie.”

The door closed.

II

Julie came to the conclusion that in some odd, perverted way, Blanche was not quite right in the head. She decided the only thing to do was not to get rattled. Oh, yes, she had been badly rattled last night . . . but then who wouldn't have been? And she was still feeling the effects of her fright the following morning. But she had only been rattled because Blanche had taken her by surprise. Next time (and there was sure to be a next time) Julie was determined to be on her guard. The woman was cracked. She drank too much and she liked to bully and frighten. "Very well, then," Julie said to herself. "I know what to watch for and I'll be ready for her." But in spite of trying to adopt a sensible attitude she had a foreboding that she was going to have a bad time with Blanche, and that Blanche had all kinds of beastly little tricks up her sleeve which would succeed no matter how careful Julie was to guard against them. And in this she was right. Not anticipating that Blanche would amuse herself by remote control (as you might say) she fell an easy victim of a practical joke Blanche had prepared for her.

While preparing her breakfast, Julie went to a large store cupboard for some tea and came face to face with the body of a man, lying face downwards on the floor, half-concealed by the shadowy darkness.

For a brief moment she watched herself run out of her body, whirl and run back into it again, and the sunlit kitchen went dark as her senses recoiled from the shock. She found herself half sitting, half lying on the floor, her nerves fluttering, her muscles rigid with fright. It took her several minutes before she could screw up enough courage to look at the body again. A closer examination revealed it to be nothing more frightening than a suit of clothes realistically stuffed with cushions, and she realized that Blanche had scored off her again.

Not quite knowing what she was doing, she removed the cushions, folded the suit and carried it into Howard Wesley's dressing-room. Passing the mirror in the hall she was startled to see how white and drawn she looked and that her eyes were like holes in a sheet.

She returned to the kitchen, made herself a cup of tea and sat down. "If there's going to be much more of this," she thought, seeing how unsteady her hands were, "I'll have to leave. Of course, it was stupid of me to have been so frightened, but who on earth would have thought she'd've taken all that trouble—and the beastly thing did look horribly life-like."

Later, she was putting linen away in a drawer when her hand touched something dry and leathery. Looking down she was petrified to see a gruesome-looking snake coiled up in the bottom of the

drawer. Julie had a horror of snakes, and she screamed wildly, dropped the linen and made a mad rush for the door. But when she had recovered from the first paralysing shock, it occurred to her that this might be yet another of Blanche's little pleasantries and she returned to the room to peer fearfully into the drawer. Although stuffed, with eyes made of glass, the thing was, nevertheless, a snake, and with a shudder, Julie threw the linen in on top of it and slammed the drawer shut. She was now completely unnerved and when the front door bell rang sharply she nearly jumped out of her skin.

She had no recollection of leaving the room nor of opening the front door. She suddenly became aware of a tall, well-dressed man towering above her and who regarded her with pale interest.

"I suppose Mrs. Wesley isn't up yet?" he said in a complaining voice and walked into the lounge hall, handed her his hat and stick. He peeled off his gloves and dropped them into his hat which she held vacantly before her, endeavouring as best she could to collect her scattered wits.

She said no, Mrs. Wesley was not up, and wondered who he could be and what he wanted.

"I am Mr. Hugh Benton, Mr. Wesley's partner," he told her. He was thin-faced, clean shaven and pale. Everything about him was pale : his hair was fair and lank, his lips were bloodless arid his eyes the colour of amber. He wore an Old Etonian tie and his voice was soft like a man speaking in church. "I suppose you are the new maid," he went on, and looked her over the way a horse dealer examines a new purchase. "Would you tell Mrs. Wesley I am here?"

"She doesn't like to be disturbed so early," Julie said, uncomfortably remembering the reception she had received at three o'clock the previous afternoon.

"How interesting," he said, and smiled, or rather he showed his small, white teeth. You couldn't call this automatic grimace a smile. "I've known Mrs. Wesley a little longer than you and I am well aware of her habits. Tell her I am here, please."

"But I—I don't think—" Julie began, knowing how furious Blanche might be to be disturbed at eleven-thirty in the morning.

"You're not paid to think," Benton said, grimacing at her. "You're paid to do as you're told."

Julie swung on her heel, her face burning, and went quickly down the passage to Blanche's room. She was furious with herself for giving this creature such an opportunity to snub her. She rapped sharply on the door, entered the room.

Blanche was lying in bed, a cigarette hung from her lips and a tumbler of brandy stood on the bedside table within reach.

She looked up; her pale, puffy little face hardened.

"I didn't tell you to barge in here just when you like, did I?" she said, and her eyes began to glitter angrily. "I'll ring for you when I want you. Now get out !"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, madam," Julie said quietly, "but Mr. Benton has called and insists on seeing you. I told him you were resting."

The angry expression vanished and Blanche struggled up in bed.

"Hugh? At this time? I mustn't keep him waiting. Quick, Julie, tidy the room. Give me my make-up box. Oh, come on, stir yourself, don't stand there looking like a stuffed fish."

This was a new Blanche : a fluttering, girlish, excited Blanche who was even more hateful, Julie thought, than the cruel, gleeful, sadistic Blanche.

While Blanche worked on her face with expert swiftness, Julie darted around the room clearing up the inevitable confusion.

"Spray some perfume about the place," Blanche commanded as she put colour on her pale cheeks. "I'm sure the room stinks." She put down the rouge puff, swallowed the brandy and put the glass in the cupboard at her side. "And open a window. Do hurry, Julie. You drag yourself about as if your back's broken."

Flushed and breathless Julie did as she was told, cleared away the further mess Blanche had made completing her toilet and bundled the soiled towels into the bathroom.

When she returned, Blanche was lying back on her pillows, her lovely arms above her head : a picture of irresistible seductiveness.

"What that little doll doesn't know about make-up," Julie thought enviously, as she stared at this miraculous transformation from a white-faced little drab to this frail, beautiful creature that now posed before her.

"Let him come in now," Blanche said in a waspish voice, "and stop gaping at me."

Julie found Benton in the lounge. He was smoking and pacing up and down, an irritable, bored expression on his thin face.

"Is she ready?" he asked crossly as Julie came in. "You've been long enough."

"Will you come this way, please?" Julie said, and walking in front of him she had the uncomfortable feeling that he was able to see through her clothes. As she paused outside Blanche's door, his hand touched her thigh : like a spider running down her flesh, and with a shiver she jerked round.

He reluctantly withdrew his hand, stared at her in his pale way, stepped past her and wandered into Blanche's room.

"Ah, Blanche," he said in his thin voice. "How lovely you look, and so early, too." He pushed the door to, but not shut and Julie, her flesh

still creeping, heard him say : "I have news. Howard won't be back until Monday. He cabled."

"You opportunist," Blanche exclaimed, and laughed.

"Well, why not?" Benton drawled. "Shall we go? I could get away this afternoon. We could have the whole weekend together."

"Hadn't you better close the door, darling?" Blanche asked archly. "You don't have to shout our misdeeds all over the flat."

Julie moved quickly away. "Ugh! What a pair," she thought. "They're welcome to each other. Did this really mean that Blanche was going away this time for a whole weekend?" She thought immediately of Harry and her heart began to thump with excitement. Would he be back from Manchester by tomorrow? It was no good making plans just yet. Blanche might not go. Harry might still be in Manchester, and she might easily be again stuck in this vast flat all by herself, and this time for a long, lonely weekend.

Later, Benton came out of Blanche's room. Julie, who was in the kitchen, heard him walk down the passage, pause, and then retrace his steps. He came into the kitchen, closed the door gently.

Julie set her back against the table and faced him.

"Is there anything you want?" she asked coldly.

"Want?" he repeated, raised his pale eyebrows. "Yes . . . there was something. I wanted to speak to you."

She waited, hostile and nervous.

Watching her closely, he took out his wallet, dipped into it with finicky fingers and drew out a five-pound note.

"Yes," he said, folding the note into a fine spill, "there was something." He tapped the spill on his knuckles and grimaced at her. "You are Mrs. Wesley's personal maid. You may hear and see things that are no concern of yours. A personal maid doesn't tell tales. Do you understand?"

Julie flushed scarlet.

"I don't need to be told that by you or anyone else!" she blurted out furiously.

Again the pale eyebrows went up.

"Please don't be angry. Mrs Wesley can be very difficult. It's seldom she keeps a maid longer than a week or so. I find it embarrassing. It is time, I feel, that I should establish a business association with her maid—with you. Do you follow what I am driving at?" He handed the five-pound note to her.

For a moment Julie hesitated. She was in the game for what she could get out of it, wasn't she? If this pale creature wanted to bribe her, why not take it? Five pounds! Perhaps he would give her more later. But she had to steel herself to meet the amber-coloured eyes when she said, "I think so."

"Ah. I thought I hadn't misjudged you. You see, there are certain things I shouldn't like Mr. Wesley to know about." The grimace became strained. "He is blind, and blind people are very sensitive—and suspicious. I wouldn't like to hurt his feelings."

"I understand," Julie said, and felt a little sick.

"So long as you see and hear nothing that goes on in this flat we'll get along well together," Benton continued. "For instance, I haven't been here this morning. Do you understand?"

Julie nodded.

"And I think we'd better keep this little arrangement to ourselves. Mrs. Wesley mightn't like it."

Again Julie nodded.

"Splendid." He stood over her, very tall, smelling of lavender water and cigars. He slipped the note into her hand and patted her arm. It was more of a caress than a pat and his touch made Julie shiver. She tried to draw back, but she was already pressed against the table and he hemmed her in. For a horrible moment she thought he was going to kiss her, but he didn't. He moved away, showed his teeth as he opened the door. "There's more where that came from, Julie. See nothing; hear nothing. It's simple, isn't it?" He went out and as he closed the door Blanche's bell rang.

When Julie entered Blanche's room she noticed immediately that the cupboard that had been hidden by the quilted wall stood open. Inside the steel-lined recess, lit by two powerful electric lights, were several fur coats, hanging in a row. Julie, who loved fur and had spent many hours staring enviously at the fur displays in the West End, longing to own a fur herself, recognized them. There was a chinchilla, a mink, a beaver, a sable, a white fox and an ermine. The other side of the cupboard was given up to a steel chest of drawers in which Julie guessed Blanche kept her jewellery.

Blanche was sitting at her dressing-table, rolling on gossamer-like stockings. She glanced up, saw Julie's staring eyes, followed their direction and smiled.

"That's something every burglar in London is talking about," she said, with an arrogant movement of her head. "No one could ever break in there, Julie. It's the most perfect foolproof safe ever invented. My husband designed it. I believe as many as six burglars—or is it eight?—I can't remember, but a number of them have tried to break into that safe. We've caught every one of them. They don't try any more. They know it's hopeless. Anyone tampering with it in any way causes a bell to ring in the Kensington police station and along comes the Flying Squad in two minutes."

"So this is what Harry is interested in," Julie thought. "What a lesson it'd be for this little beast if she does lose her furs."

Blanche was saying, "Only Mr. Wesley and myself know the combination and where the locks are concealed."

"Is there anything I can do for you, madam?" Julie said, deliberately changing the subject. She didn't want Blanche to think she was in any way interested in the safe.

"I'm going away for the weekend. Mr. Wesley won't be back until Monday. I want you to pack. Here's a list of things I'll take with me. I've jotted them down for you."

Expecting a repetition of her last packing experience, Julie took the list and began to lay out the clothes Blanche had chosen. Even when she had packed and Blanche showed no inclination to have the suitcases unpacked, she still waited for Blanche to begin her baiting, but she didn't. She seemed occupied with her thoughts and, as she dressed, she hummed under her breath and seemed scarcely aware that Julie was in the room.

Suddenly she said : "What will you do over the weekend, Julie?"

"I—I don't know, madam," Julie returned, not expecting this.

"Well, you mustn't be idle. You'll find plenty of sewing to do and you'd better clean the silver. Do make yourself useful and don't let me have to tell you what to do. There are the flowers, and my shoes want attention and—oh, there's plenty to do if you look around."

"Yes, madam," Julie said.

"You can go out on Sunday, but I don't want this flat left empty at night. You understand that? And for goodness' sake don't bring any strange men in here. I know what you girls are like. The porter knows you are here alone and he'll keep an eye on you."

Julie, flushed and furious, turned away.

"Now don't get into a pet," Blanche said, frowning. "I'm not saying you'd do it, but I want you to know it's something I just won't have. Come here, Julie."

Julie went up to her, her face sullen and rebellious.

"What a pretty figure you have, and what lovely skin." Blanche's fingers, like dry little sticks, touched Julie's cheek and Julie, shuddering, started back. "You mustn't be afraid of me," Blanche said, her eyes lighting up. "You're not, are you?"

"No madam," Julie said uneasily.

"That's right," Blanche laughed. "It's so silly, but some people do seem afraid of me. I try to be kind to everyone. Of course, I do play practical jokes, but that's only my fun." She was now watching Julie closely. "Did the old man in the cupboard frighten you?"

"Not very much," Julie said indifferently.

"Didn't he?" The forget-me-not blue eyes hardened. The other maid had hysterics. It was too funny. And the snake? Didn't that startle you ——" She laughed gleefully. "The snake's my favourite joke. My

husband loathes it. I put it in his bed sometimes.”

Julie turned away. She didn't want Blanche to see the hatred she felt for her, nor the longing she was sure showed plainly in her face to lay hands on her and shake her.

“Do you like furs, Julie?” Blanche asked abruptly as she put the finishing touches to her make-up.

“You're not going to catch me with that trick again,” Julie thought, said, “Yes, madam, I suppose I do.”

“Well, look at mine. Touch them, Julie. I want you to like them.”

Julie didn't move.

“Thank you, madam, but I'm not interested in other people's furs.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Blanche said with a gay laugh. “Look at them. There's no woman alive who wouldn't give her eyes to possess them. That mink cost five thousand and the white Arctic fox . . . I wouldn't like to tell you what that cost. Go in and look at them.”

Julie drew near the safe, tried to look disinterested, but the beauty of the coats was too much for her.

“Take the mink off the hanger,” Blanche said casually. “You can put it on if you like.”

Julie stepped into the cupboard, reached for the mink coat. There was a sudden swishing sound and the steel walls slammed to, shutting her in with a soundless rush of air.

For a moment or so she was too surprised to move or think and a tiny spark of panic began to expand inside her, but she quickly controlled herself.

“You asked for it,” she thought. “You should have guessed she was up to something. You've got to keep calm. She can't keep you in here for long. She's catching a train. But I wish there was a little more room. These beastly furs make it so hot and there doesn't seem to be much air. I suppose she thinks she'll scare the life out of me. Well, she won't! I'm not going to lose my head. I'll sit down and wait until she lets me out.”

Still keeping the threatening panic under control, Julie squatted on the floor. The skirts of the fur coats touched her head and face and worried her.

“But suppose she goes off and leaves me here? Suppose she really is cracked and doesn't care?” she thought suddenly. “I can't last long in here without air. It's getting difficult to breathe now.” Then, suddenly, the light went out and hot, choking darkness descended on her.

She heard herself whimper and she struggled to her feet, the soft furs clinging to her. She had always been afraid of confined spaces. This awful breathless darkness made her feel that she was buried alive. She lost her head. Screaming wildly, she hammered on the cold, steel wall; tore, kicked and scratched at the shiny surface like a mad

thing. The furs twined round her, impeding her movements, suffocating her. Her hands were as useless as rubber hammers as she beat on the door. She felt she was drowning in a sea of choking darkness and fell on her knees, still screaming. Disturbed by her violence one of the fur coats slipped off its hanger and enveloped her.

III

Consciousness returned slowly, like the awakening from a heavy and uneasy sleep, and she found herself lying on her bed, alone. She stared up at the ceiling for a long time and she cried. She had no idea why she cried except perhaps she had been very frightened and she still had no control over her shaken nerves.

Later, when she could cry no more, she wondered who had carried her from the cupboard to her bed, and immediately thought of Hugh Benton. That his hands had touched her filled her with a shivering disgust.

"This settles it," she thought. "I'm not staying. She's mad and dangerous. I might have died."

She got off the bed and walked unsteadily along the passage to Blanche's room. She had a vague idea that Blanche would still be there and she would tell her that she was leaving at once. But Blanche had gone. The big, luxurious room seemed strangely empty without her. The blue-quilted wall once more concealed the doors of the steel-lined cupboard. There was a faint smell of lavender water and cigars in the air, and Julie shuddered. So Benton had been there.

She went to the bedside cupboard and took out a bottle of brandy and a glass. She sat limply on the bed and drank some of the brandy. The silky liquor took instant effect : the unsteady faintness went away.

"But I'm not going to stay," she thought. "I'll pack and get out to-night. There's no point in waiting. It won't matter how careful I am she'll always outwit me. I'll never have a moment's peace from her. No, I'm going. I don't care what Harry says. I've had enough."

It wasn't only Blanche. She pretended it was, but the sight of those expensive fur coats had frightened her, for all her bravado. It was too risky. The police would suspect at once that she had had something to do with the robbery. As soon as they found out (and they would find out) that she had worked for Hewart, they'd know she was the inside plant. No, she wasn't going to have anything more to do with Blanche nor with the fur coats.

She heard a bell ringing somewhere in the flat, and for some seconds she didn't move, then she realized it was the telephone bell and she reached out, picked up the receiver by the bed.

"Julie?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Where are you, Harry? I was thinking about you. I must see you. I'm so glad you "phoned. It's extraordinary . . . just when I was thinking of you."

"What's up?" His voice was sharp.

"I must see you," she said hysterically. "I don't care how busy you

are. I must see you, Harry."

"All right, all right. Don't get excited. I can see you in an hour. Can you get away?"

"She's gone for the weekend. Oh, Harry, it's good to hear your voice." An idea dropped into her mind. "Come round here. There's nobody here but me. You can see the place. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Not over the "phone," he said, raising his voice. "Are you sure no one will come?"

"Oh, no, no one will come. Mr. Wesley won't be back until Monday night." She looked at the bedside clock. It was half-past four. "When will you be here?"

"Six; a little after, perhaps. Say six-fifteen."

"And Harry, be careful when you come in. The porter's watching the flat."

There was a short silence on the line.

"Maybe I'd better not come," he said slowly. "I don't want to box this up after all the trouble I've taken."

"You must come. Take the lift to the top floor and walk down. The owner of the top flat is a Mrs. Gregory. Pretend you're calling on her."

"You're getting smart," he said, and laughed. "All right, I'll be along."

"It'll be wonderful to see you again, Harry."

"You bet."

But as soon as she had hung up she became uneasy, wondering what he would say when she told him she was not going to stay. Then an idea came to her that brought her off the bed and sent her running to Blanche's wardrobe.

"I'll give him the surprise of his life," she thought, delighted with the idea. "I'll make myself look so beautiful he won't be able to resist me."

It took her some time to choose an evening gown from Blanche's vast collection, but at last she was satisfied. The gown she had chosen was the colour of a wild poppy, low cut and with a full sweeping skirt. She dressed her thick, dark hair to her shoulders, and, by a quarter to six, she was ready.

Studying herself critically in the mirror she knew Dana couldn't hold a candle to her as she looked now. She was prettier, younger, less cynical and more seductive. The dress accentuated her beauty as no other dress had ever done. She scarcely recognized herself.

A few minutes after six the front door bell rang, and there was Harry, his grey felt hat at a jaunty angle, his hands thrust into his overcoat pockets. For a moment he didn't recognize her, then he took a quick step forward, a bewildered smile lighting his face.

"Julie! You look wonderful! In borrowed plumes ! Well I'll be damned!" he exclaimed, and meant it. He couldn't believe she was the same girl. "She's absolutely terrific," he thought, bowled over. "A real smasher, and I didn't know it." He caught hold of her, but she pushed him away.

"No, don't touch me," she said sharply. "I'm not going to be messed about."

Startled by the hard expression in her eyes, he became awkward and a little embarrassed.

"You're lovely, Julie," he said, still gaping at her. "Cinderella's nothing on you. You're an absolute knock-out. One of her dresses?"

"Of course. You don't suppose I could afford to buy this for myself, do you? But come in. I want to talk to you."

He followed her into the lounge, and for the first time in his life he felt at a disadvantage. Her beauty and her surroundings shook his confidence in himself. He found himself falling in love with her as he stood staring at her. It was something he had never experienced before, and he didn't know how to cope with it.

Julie was quick to see the impression she had made on him, and exploited it. She stood before the big fireplace and looked at him steadily, her face cold and set.

"What's the matter, Julie? Aren't you going to give me a kiss?"

"No, I'm not!" she snapped. "I want to talk to you. I'm leaving here. I can't stand it any more."

She told him about Blanche.

"You've no idea what she's like," she concluded, her eyes flashing. "She's cracked. I mean it. She's dangerously cracked. She might have killed me. I don't know from one minute to the next what's going to happen. I'm afraid to open a drawer or a cupboard. I'm scared to answer her bell. Well, I'm not going to stand it, and I don't see why I should."

"Now, look, Julie, you're worked up," he said, dismayed by her determined expression. "You'll see it differently tomorrow. You're not going to let a few practical jokes get you down, are you?"

"She frightens me and gets on my nerves. There'll be no peace for me as long as I stay here. It's not worth it. It's no good, Harry, I'm not staying."

He went over to the settee and sat down. This was serious. He decided he'd have to tell her why she was here, to show her it wasn't just something she could chuck up at a moment's notice.

"Look, Julie, you may as well know now as later," he said, as he took out a cigarette with a none too steady hand. "I'm after those furs. You've guessed it by now, haven't you?"

"Do you take me for a fool? Of course I've guessed it. And I don't

like it.”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. You’re safe enough,” he assured her hastily. “I want you to find out how that safe operates. It’s the toughest job in town. I’ve made up my mind to crack it and you’re the only one who can help me.”

“Well, you can’t open it,” Julie said shortly. “She told me about it. It’s wired to the Kensington police station.”

“There you are !” he explained, sitting forward. “That’s exactly what I wanted to know. What else did she tell you?”

“She said eight burglars have been caught trying to get into it. How do you like that?”

“Four,” Harry said. Not eight. I thought that was how they were caught, but I wasn’t sure. Don’t you see, kid? You can get me all kinds of useful information if you’ll only stick it. Tell me about the furs.”

“There’s a mink coat. She said it cost five thousand.” Julie made a little grimace. She couldn’t get the furs out of her mind. Since she had seen them she had been thinking about them, longing to possess them. “And a white Arctic fox. That’s a beauty; much too good for that little horror. And there’s also a beaver, a chinchilla, a sable and an ermine.”

“Seen any jewellery?”

No, but I know it’s kept in a steel cabinet in the safe.”

All the time Harry was questioning her he was thinking how he could persuade her to stay. Somehow he had to persuade her to work with him. He had to find a weakness in her and play on it.

“You said the door of the safe shut when you went in. Did it shut fast or slow?”

“Like a mousetrap going off,” Julie said with a shiver. “There’s no air in there once the doors are closed. You would die if you were trapped in there for long.”

“The idea is not to be trapped. Did she close the door or was it automatic?”

“She wasn’t near it. I don’t really know.”

“Well, let’s look at it. Take me to her bedroom.”

“All right, but you understand I’m not going on with this? You can see if you want to, and you’d better take a good look at it. You won’t see it with my help any more.”

He followed her into Blanche’s bedroom feeling more dismayed and helpless than ever. Her hard determination defeated him.

She showed him the quilted wall.

“It’s behind that. Don’t touch it. We don’t want the police here.”

“You’re damned right we don’t,” he said uneasily, and went over to examine the wall. No sign of anything. It’s a pretty neat job. Did the door open outwards or slide to one side?”

“It slid to one side.”

He stood looking at the wall thoughtfully for several minutes, then he shook his head.

"No good. We'll have to find out more about how it works before I tackle it. You'll have to find out for me, Julie."

"I'm not going to," Julie said, aware of his uneasiness. "I've told you. I'm not staying."

He pulled her to him.

"Stick it a little longer and I'll make it a hundred quid instead of fifty. Come on, Julie, be a gutsy kid. You've done fine up to now."

She looked up at him, her full lips near his.

No, Harry, I've had enough. You see, you've told me what you're up to and that makes me your accomplice. I'm not going to be mixed up with the police, and besides I can't stand any more from that woman. You just don't know how she frightens me."

He had a sudden idea. As soon as it entered his mind he realized to his astonishment how much this girl meant to him now. "All right," he thought, "I may as well face it. She's knocked me. She's what I want. I'm not going to lose her. There's never been anyone like her before. I'm going to have her if I have to marry her, and damn it, that's what I want to do."

"Aren't you getting a little het up, Julie?" he said, taking her hand. "Two or three more days and the job's done. Listen, let's get this job over and we'll get married. How would you like that?" He looked at her eagerly. "I'll have enough money to be on easy street for the rest of my days. We can go to America; live on the fat of the land."

Julie pushed him away and stared at him. This was unexpected, and a little tingle of excitement ran up her spine. "Marry me? Go to the States?"

"Why not? You want fun, don't you?" He was excited now. "I'll give you fun. I'll give you the world on a plate. I love you. Don't you understand, darling? I'm crazy about you."

"If you're lying . . ." she began, her eyes flashing.

"Of course I'm not. I mean it, Julie. Look, suppose you don't go through with this. What'll happen to you? Suppose you break with me? What are you going to do? Go back to Hewart? He won't want you. Earn four quid a week in a factory? You'll love that, won't you? I'm offering you everything you want : clothes, fun, money, and you can have me if you want me. Damn it, I can't be fairer than that, can I? I have friends in the States. We'll have a terrific time together. What do you say?"

She studied him for a moment. It was a triumphant moment for her. He meant it! He was in love with her. She had only to play her cards carefully and she would get anything she wanted from him without risks.

"I love you too, Harry," she said, and slipped her arms round his neck. "But I'm not staying here. I'm not a crook. All right, I admit I've done things I shouldn't have done, but I've kept inside the law. I've never done nor am I ever going to do anything that'd land me in prison. And, please, Harry, don't go through with this. She's too clever. You'll be caught. I know you'll be caught. Then what'll happen to me?"

He held her to him.

"That's torn it," he was thinking. "Now what the hell am I going to do? I'll lose her if I don't look out. I'll have to see Ma French. She'll have to find a way round this. She'll have to find another girl to do the job."

"All right, Julie," he said, and kissed her. "I won't hold you to it if that's the way you feel. It won't make any difference to us. I'm crazy about you, kid. I'll find a way to getting into that tin box. But you quit. I'll see you right."

"Honest, Harry? You really mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"But why go through with it? Let's go to the States now. Don't take the risk, Harry."

"I've got to do the job," he said, a little impatiently. "Where do you think the money's coming from? Listen, Julie, this job's worth eight thousand to me. I've got to do it."

Eight thousand!

For a moment she was tempted to stay and help him, then caution pushed the idea out of her head. Why should she? He could manage. He would find a way. And then he'd spend the money on her and there'd be no risk.

"All right, Harry . . ." she began.

"What's that?" he broke in, stiffening. "Did you hear anything?"

Julie pushed away from him.

"No . . . what do you mean?"

He went quickly to the door, opened it, closed it immediately.

"Someone's in the flat," he whispered.

Blanche!

Julie nearly fainted. To be caught in Blanche's bedroom in her clothes! She stood paralysed with terror.

Quick steps sounded down the passage, coming towards the room.

"It's Mrs. Wesley!" Julie gasped. "What am I to do?" She made a futile dart to the window. "I must hide . . ."

The door opened. She turned, clenching her fists and stifling a scream. A man came in: a man who wore black-lensed glasses that hid his eyes. He stood in the doorway, the black lenses looked right at her.

"Is there anyone here?" he asked, mildly. "Blanche, are you here?"

And Julie realized with sick relief that this was Howard Wesley who, of course, couldn't see her.

CHAPTER THREE

HOWARD WESLEY was not tall, although he gave Julie the impression that he was a big man. He was broad-shouldered and powerfully built, and he carried himself erect. In spite of his disfiguring black-lensed glasses she could see he had excellent features and his determined mouth and chin gave him an air of authority. His broad forehead was capped by dark, unruly hair, turning white at the temples. She was surprised later to hear he was only thirty-eight.

Both Julie and Harry stood staring at him, and as he moved into the room they silently gave ground.

"Is anyone here?" he repeated.

Harry waved at Julie and grimaced. She realized he was trying to tell her that she had to handle this, and she saw he was right.

She said in a husky little voice, "Oh, yes . . . me."

Wesley frowned, continued to look in her direction as if he had known all along she was there.

"And who are you?" he asked. He took from his hip pocket a gold cigarette-case and selected a cigarette.

"I'm Julie Holland, the new maid," she told him, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I see." He patted his pockets and his frown deepened. "I wonder if you could give me a light? I seem to have left my matches in my overcoat pocket."

She looked wildly round the room. Harry took out his lighter and put it on the table. He pointed at it, and jerked his thumb at Wesley. She was surprised to see how calm Harry was. He scarcely moved and was watching Wesley closely, his eyes hard and alert.

In a way his calmness annoyed Julie, who was shaking all over and had difficulty in breathing. She snatched up the lighter and moved towards Wesley. It was a relief to see that he continued to look at the place where she had been standing and did not turn his head as she approached. To her it was proof that he was blind and couldn't see them.

She tried to operate the lighter, but her fingers were so shaky that she nearly dropped it.

"Give it to me," he said, and held out his hand.

She gave him the lighter.

"Where is Mrs. Wesley?" he asked.

"She's away for the weekend, sir," Julie said, looked at Harry who had moved to the door. He shook his head at her, and winked.

"I see." Wesley lit the cigarette, held the lighter out in midair.

"Thank you."

Julie took it from him, put it on the table. Harry picked it up.

"Did she say when she was returning?" Wesley went on, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets.

"She didn't expect you until Monday night. She'll be back by then."

"And you didn't expect me either?" He smiled. "I hope I haven't spoiled your evening."

"Oh, no, sir," Julie said hastily, wondering if he suspected anything. "I haven't anything to do. I—I was tidying madam's room."

"Were you? You smell as if you were going to a party." He laughed apologetically. "I didn't mean to be rude, but I have to rely on my nose and ears these days. That's a very nice perfume you are wearing."

Julie flushed scarlet and stepped back. It should be nice. It was Blanche's perfume.

"I—I wasn't going out," she stammered.

"Mr. Gerridge is seeing to the luggage," Wesley went on. "He's my secretary. He should be up in a moment. Can you give us coffee?"

"Yes, sir," she said, thinking. "I must get out of this dress at once."

"Let us have it in the study. I have some work to do." Wesley turned and appeared to look right at Harry who took a quick step back. "I have an odd feeling there's someone else in the room." Wesley went on as he groped for the door handle. "Is there?"

He could have reached out and touched Harry. Julie caught her breath sharply, motioned Harry back.

"Oh, no, sir, of course there isn't."

"I get these feelings," Wesley said, frowning. "All right, let's have the coffee as soon as you can," and he went out.

"Phew !" Harry whispered as soon as the door closed. "That was too damned close. Get out of that dress. This other bloke mustn't see you."

"It wasn't my fault," Julie said, near tears. "I didn't know he was coming."

"Never mind that. Get out of those clothes!" Harry urged. "Go on, hurry !"

She ran to Blanche's cupboard where she had left her uniform and then went into the bathroom. It didn't take her a moment to change.

Harry was listening at the door when she returned.

"Get their coffee," he whispered. "Hurry. I want to get out of here."

"When am I going to see you again?" she asked breathlessly. "I'm not staying here. This settles it."

"I'll see you tomorrow afternoon," he said. "Don't go until then. I'll be right opposite in the Park at three o'clock. Slip out and we'll talk. Now, get off. I want to get out of here."

She hesitated for a moment.

"All right, but it's no use trying to persuade me. I'm not going to stay." She left him, and went quickly to the kitchen.

When she took the coffee into the study, Wesley was sitting in an arm-chair, smoking a cigar. A young man, not much older than herself, whose lean, pleasantly ugly face lit up with a smile when he saw her, was sitting at the desk sorting through a pile of papers. She guessed he was Gerridge, Wesley's secretary. He waved to a table near Wesley and went on with his work.

As she stooped to put the tray on the table, Wesley said : "I suppose you have only just arrived?"

"I came yesterday, sir."

"Well, I hope you will be happy here," Wesley returned, as if he doubted it. "We didn't expect to be back so soon. But don't let us interfere with your weekend plans. You can go out if you want to. We shan't need anything. I think we'll spend the weekend at the factory. We'll only bother you to give us breakfast tomorrow morning. You understand about that? You can order it from the restaurant. We shall be off about nine o'clock. Shall we say breakfast at eight-thirty?"

"Very well, sir,"

"How awful for him to be blind," she thought, as she went to Blanche's bedroom. "He's nice and kind. How could he have married that beastly little creature?"

When she had tidied up Blanche's room she went into the kitchen. She didn't know what to do with herself. It was still early, and she would have liked to have gone out but she didn't want to go alone. Instead, she paced up and down and worried about the future.

She thought about Harry. Before Wesley arrived she had been excited at the prospect of going to America with Harry, now she wasn't so sure. She found herself thinking of Wesley and comparing him to Harry. It was like comparing a paste diamond to a real one. She suddenly realized that Harry was characterless and shallow, that his clothes were flashy and vulgar. Wesley was rich. Harry would never be as rich as Wesley. If he did steal the furs, how long would eight thousand pounds last? Not long, if they went to America and spent freely, and then what would happen?

"I might as well face it," she told herself. "Harry's a thief. Dawson warned me against him. Hewart hates him. He's mixed up with that awful Mrs. French. Then there's Dana. What kind of trouble shall I be letting myself in for if I do marry him?"

If she was going to marry, she ought to marry a man like Wesley. She would get what she wanted then : a big house, clothes, servants, a car, everything! But, of course, Wesley wouldn't look at her. Besides, he was already married. But suppose she told him about the robbery? He might be nice to her; do something for her. She pulled herself up,

suddenly frightened. She musn't think like this. It was dangerous. She remembered what Hewart had told her about the girl who had talked. She must get that idea out of her head.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a soft rap on the door and Gerridge came in, carrying the coffee tray.

"Hello," he said with a friendly grin. "I thought I'd bring the tray along. That was cracking good coffee."

"I expect you needed it," she said, pleased, and took the tray.

"I'm Tom Gerridge," he told her, wandering round the kitchen, hands in pockets. "I'm Mr. Wesley's valet and Man Friday. We may as well get to know each other. You'll be seeing a lot of me."

"Shall I?"

"Rather. I told Mr. Wesley I thought you were a stunner." Julie turned away and began to put the coffee things in the sink.

"I hope you don't mind," he said. "It's true, you know." She giggled.

"No. I don't mind. But I don't suppose Mr. Wesley was very interested."

"Oh, but he was," Gerridge assured her. "At least he didn't say so, but he pricked up his ears all right."

Julie laughed and began to wash up.

"Mr. Wesley's using the dictaphone at the moment," Gerridge explained. "That's why I came along to keep you company. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, I don't mind."

"That's fine. How do you like it here?"

"Not very much," Julie said truthfully.

"I suppose Mrs. Wesley has been up to her tricks?"

"She has."

"The usual practical jokes : stuffed snakes, shutting you in the safe?"

Julie stared at him.

"How did you know?"

"Oh, she tries it on everyone. She's tried it on me. I was locked in that damned safe for ten minutes. I thought I was going to die."

"Well, I don't intend to stay here much longer," Julie said firmly. "She dangerous."

"Oh, but you must stay. You won't mind Mrs. Wesley once you get used to her. She leaves you alone after a bit. Never bothers me now. And you'll like Wesley. He's a first-rate chap." Julie leaned against the sink, quite ready now for a gossip. "I can't imagine how he could have married her," she said. "She wasn't always like this, you know," Gerridge said.

"When they first met she was the rage of London and she was really marvellous. She swept him off his feet. She knew he had bags of money, and she took advantage of him from the very start. She not

only chiselled a fat settlement out of him (she's squandered every penny of that now) but she also persuaded him to agree that if the marriage broke up she was to have another large sum of money. I think he's pretty sick about that settlement now. As far as she's concerned it's heads I win, tails you lose, and she behaves just as she likes."

"But why doesn't he give her the money and get rid of her?"

"He can't afford to. He's working on an invention that'll halve the cost and fitting time of pilotless flying equipment and he's sunk every penny into the research. He just couldn't afford to pay her off, and she knows it."

"I think it's terrible," Julie said, shocked. "And to be blind as well."

"Yes," Gerridge shook his head. "He had a big disappointment this week. A French specialist thought he could operate successfully on his eyes. That's why we went to Paris." He glanced at his watch, whistled, slid off the table. "I must be back. I said I'd only be away five minutes. I'll be seeing you again."

Later, when Julie was in bed, she heard Gerridge call, "Good night," and she started up, thinking he was calling to her. She liked Gerridge, and smiled to herself when she realized he was speaking to Wesley. She heard the front door close and it occurred to her she was now alone in the flat with Wesley.

"Well, that's nothing to worry about," she thought. "He's safe. If it'd been Benton I should be scared stiff, but Wesley . . ."

She was dropping off to sleep when a sudden crash of breaking glass startled her awake. She listened, then jumped out of bed, slipped on her dressing-gown.

"He must have had an accident," she thought, alarmed and went quickly down the passage to Wesley's room, listened outside the door. She heard movements and she knocked.

"Who's there?" Wesley asked, then, "Oh, come in, Julie."

She opened the door. He was standing in the middle of the room, in dressing-gown and pyjamas, and looked helplessly in her direction. He still wore the disfiguring black-lensed glasses, and she found herself wishing he would take them off. At his feet was a smashed tumbler, the contents of which made a dark pool on the carpet.

"Hello, Julie," he said, with a rueful smile. "Come to rescue me?"

"I heard—" she began, stopped short when she saw blood running down his hand. "Oh! You've cut yourself."

"The damn thing slipped out of my hand, and when I tried to clear it up I dug a bit of glass into my finger."

"I'll get a bandage," Julie said, glad to help him. She quickly brought a first-aid outfit from Blanche's bathroom. "If you'll sit down I'll fix it for you."

"Thanks." He groped about, muttered under his breath, "Where's the chair? I seem to have lost my bearings."

She took his arm and led him to a chair.

"It's sickening to be so helpless," he said as he sat down. "I don't know what I should have done if you hadn't come."

Not knowing quite what to say, and feeling ill at ease, she remained silent. She stopped the bleeding and wound on a bandage. "I'll put a fingerstall on, then you won't have any trouble," she said.

"That's very nice of you. Were you asleep?"

"Oh, no," Julie said, as she slipped a wash-leather fingerstall over the bandage and fastened the tape round his wrist. "Is that comfortable?"

"It's fine." He flexed his fingers. "Have I made an awful mess?"

"It's all right, but I'll clear it up."

She fetched a dustpan and brush, swept up the pieces of glass and wiped the stain with a cloth.

"It's all right now," she said. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

He startled her asking, "How old are you, Julie?"

"Twenty-one," she told him, wondering why he should ask. "And pretty?"

She blushed.

"I don't know."

"Gerridge says you are and I believe he is a good judge. It's just occurred to me I shouldn't be here alone with you. I should have thought of it before. Mrs. Wesley wouldn't like it." He fidgeted with his dressing-gown cord. "But I don't feel inclined to get dressed again and go to my club. I suppose I should, but I'm not going to. All the same I think it would be better not to say anything to Mrs. Wesley that I spent the night here. I shall say nothing and I'll be glad if you don't."

"Oh, no," Julie said, realizing at once that Blanche would be utterly filthy if she knew. "I won't say anything."

"Thank you." He was unmoved and not in the least embarrassed. "It's a lot of nonsense really, but—well, there it is. You'd better get off to bed now."

"Are you sure there's nothing else I can do for you?" Julie asked.

"There is one thing you can tell me before you go," he said, and smiled. "Did Mr. Benton come here while I've been away; Mr. Hugh Benton, my partner?"

Julie nearly said yes, but something in the way he was sitting, the way his hands suddenly became still, warned her to be careful. She remembered with a feeling of shame that she had accepted Benton's hush money.

“No,” she said, and hated herself for lying. “No one’s been here.”

“I see.” He seemed to relax and sank further back into the arm-chair. “All right. Good night, Julie. Turn off the light, will you, please? I don’t need it.”

It seemed odd to leave him sitting in the chair in complete darkness: odd and rather sad.

II

Harry Gleb lit a cigarette and threw the match with unnecessary violence into the grate.

"It's no good bawling at me," he said sharply. "She won't play. I've done what I could, but nothing doing. She walks out tomorrow."

Mrs. French eyed him. Her face was set and cold.

"She's got to stay. We'll never get another chance to put a girl in there. I know Blanche Wesley. If she walks out, we're sunk."

Harry shrugged helplessly.

"I've done my best. I can't make the girl stay if she's made up her mind to quit, can I?"

"The trouble with you is you're soft," Mrs. French said harshly. "You ought to have taken the little bitch by the scruff of her neck and given her a damn good hiding. That's what she wants. She'd do what she's told if you handled her right."

Harry scowled at her.

"I'm not beating women up. I don't stand for it. We'll have to think of something else."

"Can't you get into your thick head there is nothing else we can do?" Mrs. French barked. "I'll talk to her."

"You won't ! " Harry snapped. "I tell you it's no good. Leave the girl alone."

Mrs. French looked at him intently.

"You're not going soft on her, are you, Harry?"

That was the last thing Harry wanted Mrs. French to suspect. He was scared of her. She knew too much about him for safety. There was Dana, too. Mrs. French was expecting him to marry her daughter. If she thought he was going soft on Julie there would be trouble. He didn't trust her. She might do anything—shop him to the bogies.

"Don't talk wet," he said. "Of course I'm not. She means nothing to me. I just won't stand for violence. You know that."

"It won't come to violence," Mrs. French said. "I'll talk to her. Maybe I'll threaten her, but nothing more. She'll behave after I've talked to her."

Harry didn't like this, but he was scared to protest too strongly.

"All right, but keep your hands off her. I won't stand for it, Ma. I'm warning you."

"You shove off," Mrs. French said curtly. "When I want to see you again, I'll send for you. The job's still on. Our plans stand. She'll do what she's told."

"Okay," Harry said uneasily, and moved to the door. "But don't touch her. I mean it."

Mrs. French didn't reply. When he had gone, she stood thinking. Then she picked up the telephone, dialled a number and waited.

Theo came on the line.

"Who is it?" he asked in his nasal whine.

"Come round here," Mrs. French ordered brusquely. "I've a job for you."

"What's up now? It's late. I was going to bed."

"Harry's gone soft on the Holland girl. She's being difficult. I want you to have a little talk with her."

"That's different," Theo said cheerfully. "That's not a job, that's relaxation. I'll be right over," and he hung up.

III

Theo sat on a park bench, opposite Park Way, his hands in his pockets, his velour hat tilted to the back of his head. A limp cigarette hung from his mouth and the smoke from it curled up into the still air, making him screw up one eye.

It was early; a few minutes to nine o'clock, and Theo was alone in this part of the Park. Except for an occasional bus there was nothing to look at, but Theo was quite happy to sit in the sunshine. Most of his life had been spent doing nothing; standing at street corners, his mind blank, his body resting. He disliked any kind of activity, regarding it only as a means to an end. And when Gerridge came out of Park Way and climbed into the waiting car, Theo sighed. He knew before very long he would have to get busy. Wesley came out some minutes later. The porter at the door guided him to the car, slammed the door and the car drove away.

Theo stubbed out his cigarette, got to his feet. As he entered the vast hall of Park Way, the porter stepped out of his office and eyed him coldly.

"And what do you want?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Going up to see my sister," Theo said. "Maid at 97. Any objection?"

The porter was suspicious. Theo could see that.

"Give her a ring if you don't believe me," Theo went on. "Tell her it's her brother, Harry."

"Don't tell me what to do," the porter snapped. "I don't know if Mrs. Wesley would like this."

"Tell her, too," Theo said, grinning. "Tell everybody. Let the newspapers in on it. Spread yourself, pal, I'm in no hurry. I want you to be happy about this."

The porter turned red. He felt he was making a fool of himself.

"You hop up quick, then," he said. "Go on and see her; and don't stay long. I don't want the likes of you in here."

"Didn't think you would; that's why I came," Theo said.

He slouched over to the automatic lift, opened the door, stepped in, slammed the lift door and pressed the button to the fourth floor.

He leaned against the side of the lift as it shot up between the floors, and lit a cigarette.

"I've got to make it snappy," he thought, "or else the old blister might be up to see what's going on."

He rang the bell of 97, and waited.

Julie opened the door.

"Hello, Jane," Theo said. His hand shot out. His open palm fitted

under her chin and he gave her a violent shove, sending her reeling into the lobby. He followed her in, closed the door, raised his fist threateningly.

“Don’t squawk. I’ve come from Ma French.”

Julie backed away. She saw before her a short, stocky youth (he couldn’t have been more than nineteen) with untidy black hair that fell over his ears and on to his greasy coat collar. His round, fat face was pasty and his eyes were close-set and cruel. There was something horribly vicious and spiteful about him.

“Don’t get excited, Jane,” Theo said, and smiled. His teeth were broken and green. “We’re going to have a little talk. Go in there. I want to sit down. I’m tired.”

Terrified, Julie backed into the lounge. Theo slouched in after her, looked round and grunted.

“Pretty good, isn’t it? Fancy wanting to leave a joint like this.” He eyed her speculatively. “You do want to leave, don’t you?”

“I’m going,” Julie said weakly. “And no one’s going to stop me.”

“I am,” Theo said, and flopped into an arm-chair. “Get the weight off your feet, Jane. Me and you’s going to have a little talk.”

Julie made a dash for the telephone, but before she could reach it, Theo had left his chair, grabbed hold of her and swung her round. As she opened her mouth to scream, he smacked her face. She staggered back with a thin wail of pain and fear, over-balanced and fell on her hands and knees.

“Next time you’ll get my fist,” Theo said. He caught hold of her arm, dragged her up and shoved her roughly into a chair. “What’s the matter with you? Want to get hurt?” Julie began to cry weakly. Satisfied she’d give no more trouble, Theo went back to his arm-chair.

“You’re going through with this job or there’ll be a load of grief coming your way,” he told her. “I don’t want any arguments. If you won’t play with Harry, you’ll play with me.”

“I won’t!” Julie sobbed. “I’ll tell the police! I won’t do it!” Theo laughed.

“That’s what you think,” he said, and took out a limp wallet from his pocket and produced three grimy photographs. “Ere, take a look at these. I pinched them from a police photographer. Real life pitchers. They’ll interest you.”

Julie flinched away.

“I’m not going to look at anything,” she said wildly. “If you don’t go

“Do you want me to hit you again, you silly mare?” Theo asked, leaning forward. “Look at ‘em or I’ll bash you.”

He threw the photographs into Julie’s lap. She caught a glimpse of disfigured faces and she swept the photographs to the floor with a

shudder.

"Pick 'em up and look at them," Theo said, getting to his feet. "I'm not going to tell you again."

Slowly Julie bent down and her fingers touched the photographs, lifted them. She looked at them, her face twisted into a horrible grimace.

"That's vitriol," Theo said. "Smashing pitchers. Proper life-like they are. I knew that bride. Her name's Emmy Parsons. She's a tart. A nigger did that to her. She wasn't a bad-looking bride before she got splashed. "Ere, keep looking at 'em. I haven't finished yet. That other bride's Edith Lawson. Fooled around with another bride's man, so she got splashed. See that? And this other one. Got a proper basin, didn't she? Slap in the puss. She was a real smasher. Used to work in a café in Leicester Square, but she talked too much. A bloke came in one night, ordered a cuppa coffee, and as she 'anded it to him he splashed "cr. I was there at the time." Theo grinned. "She made a noise like a train going through a tunnel. And listen, Jane. The cops never found out who done it. They wouldn't find out if it happened to you. And it's going to happen if you don't play ball with us."

Julie shivered, dropped the photographs. The sight of the women's disfigured faces filled her with cold dread. No other threat could have been more effective.

Theo tapped her shoulder.

"Look, this is the stuff." He held between finger and thumb a little green bottle. "I carry it around, see? And don't think you can run away and hide. I'm good at finding people. From now on I'm going to watch you. One move out of turn and you'll get it. Keep your mouth shut and do what you're told and you'll be all right. But start something we don't like and you'll kiss your looks good-bye. Understand?"

"Yes," Julie said.

"Right. Well, that's all for this time, Jane. No more nonsense. We want to know how the safe opens by Wednesday. No excuses. Wednesday, or I'll be along and I'll shake you up again. Meet us at the Mayfair Street office at eight o'clock, Wednesday. If you're not there, you'll be sorry. Understand?"

"Yes," Julie said.

"Okay. Now where's the bathroom?"

She didn't know why he should want the bathroom, but she was too dazed and frightened to think clearly. She pointed. "Through there."

"Come on, that's where we're going."

"I don't want to . . ."

"You're going to start a lot of trouble for yourself if you don't get out of that habit, Jane," he said. "Come on."

She stumbled down the passage to the bathroom with him at her heels. She had a presentiment that something horrible was going to happen to her, but there was nothing she could do about it.

"Nice joint," Theo said, closing the bathroom door. "Everything laid on. Almost a pleasure to keep clean. Okay, Jane, just stand by the bath, will you?"

She cringed away from him.

"Please leave me alone," she implored him. "I'll do anything : don't touch me."

"Don't be a silly mare," he said, grinning. "You got me outa bed three hours before my time. You've mucked up my morning. Brides don't do that to me."

"Please . . ."

"And you don't either, you —" The obscenity petrified her.

"See how you like this." He aimed a light blow at her face so she brought up her hands. Then he hit her viciously in the pit of her stomach.

"Didn't want you to sick over any nice carpet," he explained with a cruel little grin, and as she crumpled to the floor and began to retch he sidled out of the bathroom and shut the door.

IV

At three o'clock the same afternoon, Harry sat on the same park bench Theo had occupied in the morning and stared up at the windows of Wesley's flat. He waited impatiently for Julie, but Julie didn't come. At a quarter to four he was angry and slightly alarmed.

"What's happened to her?" he wondered uneasily. "She can't have hooked it without waiting for me."

After waiting another five minutes he got up and walked rapidly to a telephone box not far away. He put through a call to Wesley's flat, but there was no answer.

He began to get seriously worried.

"Where the hell has she got to?" he asked himself as he stood uneasily outside the telephone box and stared up at the blank windows.

It was too risky to go to the flat. For some moments he was undecided what to do, and he was aware of a growing feeling of apprehension. If Ma French had done anything to her! He clenched his fists angrily. It was no good standing here, wondering. He'd have to find out. He waved to a passing taxi, gave an address in Chelsea and sat back, lighting a cigarette with an unsteady hand. If they had done anything to her! He'd make them pay somehow. She was his now. If anyone thought they could touch her, they'd have him to reckon with. Mrs. French and Dana were having tea in their small service flat when Harry came striding in.

Dana went to him.

"Why, hello, Harry. I wasn't expecting you."

But Harry ignored her, pushing past her and confronting Ma with a look of rage on his face.

"What's happened to Julie?" he demanded roughly. "We were going to meet this afternoon. She hasn't turned up. I've rung the flat and there's no answer. Do you know anything about it?"

Mrs. French met his furious stare calmly.

"You're behaving like a damned fool, as usual, Harry," she said. "Why should you care what's happened to her?"

He pulled himself together with an effort. He mustn't let her suspect he was in love with Julie. There'd be time for that when the job was done and he'd received his cut. If either of these women thought he was going off with Julie they'd stop him. He was sure of that.

"I don't know what you mean," he snapped. "She's working for us. I'm keeping my eye on her. Now she's vanished."

"You said last night she wasn't going to work for us," Mrs. French reminded him. "I think you're making too much fuss of her. It's not

fair on Dana, Harry.”

Harry glowered at her.

“Does she mean anything to you?” Dana demanded, confronting him.

“No ! But I want to know what’s happened to her.”

“Then that’s all right,” Mrs. French said and laughed. “I sent Theo to see her this morning. They had a little chat and she changed her mind about leaving. I expect she’s sulking.”

“Theo? You sent that stinking rat . . .”

“Why not? You said yourself she was being difficult.”

“Theo!” Harry was pale, and restrained his rage with difficulty. “Did he touch her?”

“Why all the interest? I thought you said the girl meant nothing to you?”

Harry stood looking first at Mrs. French and then at Dana. Then he swung on his heel and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

“He’ll soon get tired of her,” Mrs. French said, as Dana started up to follow him. “If he doesn’t, I’ll get her out of the way when the job’s done. Now, don’t be silly about this. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Oh, shut up!” Dana exclaimed, and burst into tears.

V

On Monday evening, Blanche Wesley returned to her flat in a waspish mood. The weekend hadn't been a success. Benton had been in a difficult, demanding mood and the hotel had been hell. Of course, Hugh hadn't much money. He gambled recklessly and was up to his ears in debt, but if he thought anything but the best was good enough for her he had better get any further idea of taking her away again for a weekend out of his miserly, pale head. And she hated Brighton anyway. Why it always had to be Brighton she couldn't think. There had been a continuous wind; it had been chilly and it rained. The hotel was unbelievable. They had refused to serve meals in the bedroom and had given her a bit of butter the size of a halfpenny with her toast. When she had complained the waiter had actually been impertinent, and that fool Hugh had told her there was a peace on. He seemed to think that was funny. She had wanted a fire in the bedroom, but the management had yammered about the fuel shortage. If it hadn't been for Hugh, who had hustled her away, she would have told the management exactly what she had thought of the hotel. The final blow had been the discovery that the hotel hadn't any brandy, and that was something she just couldn't do without. So she was forced to pub-crawl in the pouring rain, and the muck they offered her wasn't fit even to cook with, and they had the audacity to charge six shillings a glass for it.

And now, as she swept into the spacious entrance lobby of Park Way, she was determined that here, at least, she wasn't going to stand any nonsense. This was her permanent home; if she wanted a fire she would have one; if she wanted service, she would get it; if she wanted a pound of butter with her morning toast the porter would damn well produce it or she'd know the reason why. If there was the slightest indication that the service had deteriorated during her absence, she would have a row; and what a glorious, flaming, hell-raising row it would be.

But the moment the head porter saw her he was out of his cubby-hole, snapping orders to the under-porter and respectfully welcoming her. The taxi was paid off, her luggage was brought in, her mail, neatly tied with string, was presented to her with a flourish. A lighted match appeared as if by magic when she put a cigarette in her pouting lips.

This was better, she thought, much more like it, and she mellowed under the soothing, respectful attention bestowed upon her.

"Well, Harris," she said, drawing off her gloves. "It's nice to be back again. I've had the most damnable weekend. What's been happening

at the flat. Any callers?"

The head porter was used to this inquiry. He was well aware that nothing was too petty to escape Blanche's attention. Since he received at least five pounds a week from her in tips it paid him to be servile, although his private opinion of her was startlingly obscene.

"Mr. Wesley and Mr. Gerridge returned to the flat on Saturday night, madam," he told her. "And a person called to see your maid on Sunday morning."

Blanche smiled amiably, flickered her long, spiky eye-lashes and revealed her beautiful little teeth.

"Did Mr. Wesley stay the weekend at the flat?" she purred. "Oh, no, madam, just Saturday night."

"Did Mr. Gerridge stay with him?"

"No, madam."

Blanche tapped ash off her cigarette.

"Of course, my maid was there to help him if he wanted help? She didn't leave the flat?"

"No, madam, she was there."

Blanche nodded, delighted. Here, at least, were the ingredients for a first-class row.

"Going to make something out of this, the little cow," the head porter thought to himself. "Well, let her get on with it. It'll give her something to do for a change."

"And who was this person who came to see my maid?" Blanche asked.

"He told me he was her brother," the head porter said, his fat face darkening, "but I must say I considered him an extremely undesirable young fellow. I didn't like the looks of him at all."

Blanche's smile vanished.

"Then why did you let him up?" she demanded, a rasp in her voice. "Didn't I tell you to keep an eye on that girl? Didn't I leave implicit instructions she was not to have a man in the flat? Surely you know by now that these chits of girls are no better than street walkers? Do you think I want my flat turned into a brothel in my absence?"

The head porter saw too late where his runaway tongue had led him.

"He called at nine o'clock yesterday morning, madam," he said uncomfortably. "He didn't stay more than a few minutes. If he had been longer I would have had him down. I assure you there was no time for any nonsense of that sort."

Blanche gave him a steady stare.

"You can be immoral at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning as easily as at nine o'clock on Saturday night," she said bitingly. "From what I hear it seems that these guttersnipes can misconduct themselves in a

few minutes without straining their nervous systems, and as for her having a brother I simply don't believe it. You are a fool, Harris. You have always been a fool and you have every indication of remaining a fool until a grave in some forgotten churchyard claims you."

"Yes madam," the hall porter said, and bowed humbly. Blanche snapped her fingers at the under-porter who was waiting with her luggage and walked to the lift.

The under-porter gathered up the luggage, winked at the head porter who glared at him, and followed Blanche into the lift.

Sweeping into her flat like a miniature tornado, Blanche managed to reach the bell in the lounge and ring it furiously before Julie was aware that she was in the flat.

Blanche looked searchingly at Julie as she came hurrying in. Julie was pale and there were dark rings under her eyes. This was not to be wondered at since she had scarcely slept the previous night.

"Get me some brandy," Blanche ordered, "and hurry. You look thoroughly washed out."

Julie didn't say anything. She had been dreading this moment. She fetched a decanter and glass and set them on the table, then picked up Blanche's suitcase and backed to the door.

"Don't go away," Blanche said sharply. "I want to talk to you. Come here, where I can see you." She poured out the brandy, drank half a tumbler of the liquor neat, refilled her glass and lit a cigarette. "What have you been doing with yourself over the weekend?"

"Oh, nothing really, madam," Julie said, avoiding Blanche's searching eyes, "I—I tidied up. There was a little sewing . . ." Blanche snapped her fingers impatiently.

"Never mind that," she said. "Did anyone call?"

"Oh, no, madam."

Blanche stared at her.

"You mean to tell me no one except yourself has been in the flat over the weekend?"

Julie hesitated, then said, "Yes, madam, that's right."

"How very odd," Blanche said. "The hall porter tells me your brother called on you yesterday."

"My—my brother?" Julie stammered, realized a little late that Theo probably had difficulty in getting past the head porter and, as an excuse to get upstairs, had made out he was her brother. "Oh, yes, madam. I—I forget. My brother did come to see me. He didn't stay long. I didn't let him into the flat. I hope you don't mind."

Blanche sipped her brandy. She felt that if she wasn't careful the row she was longing to stage might not materialize.

"I think you are lying," she said sharply. "I don't believe you have a brother, and I don't believe for one moment you didn't ask this man

into my flat.”

“I assure you, madam,” Julie said, fear giving her courage, “he didn’t come into the flat. He—he’s got a job on a ship and only came to say good-bye.”

Blanche glowered at her.

“I see,” she said.

“There’s no point in pursuing that,” she thought. “The little slut’s slippery, but I’ve not finished with her yet.”

“So, apart from your brother, no one else has been here?” she went on, lifting her eyebrows.

“Had the hall porter told her that Wesley had been back?” Julie wondered. “Had he been off duty?” Wesley had asked her to say nothing. She stood hesitating, not knowing what to say.

“Well, speak up!” Blanche snapped.

Julie decided to risk it.

“No one else, madam.”

Blanche smiled.

“Not even, Mr. Wesley, Julie?” she asked gently.

“She knows,” Julie thought. “Now, what am I to do?” But Blanche gave her no opportunity to make excuses. She flared up into a furious rage.

“So that’s it, is it?” she stormed, starting out of her chair. “Of course, a blind man can’t be too particular. They say all cats are grey in the dark, but I’m surprised he picked on a skivvy !”

Julie felt herself go hot and then cold. But she knew there was nothing she dare do. She had to stay in this flat now until Mrs. French told her she could leave.

“You’re making a mistake . . .” she began.

“Mistake?” Blanche’s voice rose to a scream. “How dare you lie to me !” She snatched up her glass of brandy and threw it at Julie. The glass whizzed past Julie’s head, smashed against the wall; some of the splinters narrowly missed her. “Get out of my sight, you dirty little slut !”

Julie made a bolt for the door as Blanche looked around for something else to throw at her. She neatly collided with Wesley as he came in.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded. “Blanche! What’s happening?”

“I’ll tell you what’s happening!” Blanche stormed. “I was just telling your cheap little mistress what I thought of her!”

Julie ran from the room. But she didn’t go far. As soon as she was out of sight, she paused to listen.

“You’d better control yourself, Blanche,” Wesley said quietly. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

"I suppose you'll deny you stayed the night here with that chit?"

"I stayed here on Saturday night," Wesley returned. "Does that annoy you?"

"Then why did she say you weren't here if you two haven't been up to something?"

"Because I told her to. Knowing your grubby little mind I foolishly thought it would save a scene. But I was wrong. Now are you satisfied?"

"You cheap cad!" Blanche said furiously, and there came the sound of a blow. There was a sudden crash of breaking glass and a thud as some piece of furniture fell over.

Horried, Julie peered into the room.

Wesley was standing motionless, his hand to his face. Blanche, livid with fury, faced him. The occasional table lay on its side surrounded by fragments of glass from a smashed vase.

"Now I hope you are satisfied," Wesley said in a strained voice.

"I'm not, you useless fool!" Blanche said, and struck him on the other side of his face with her open hand.

Julie caught her breath sharply, but neither of them heard her.

Wesley stepped back.

"That's enough, Blanche. You're drunk. Go and lie down and sleep it off. You disgust me."

"Oh! I hate you!" Blanche screamed at him. She looked wildly round the room, darted to the fireplace and snatched up the poker. There was a murderous expression in her eyes that chilled Julie. As Blanche rushed towards Wesley, brandishing the poker, Julie cried out, "Mind! She's got a poker!"

But Wesley made no move to avoid Blanche, and Julie darted forward, seized Blanche's wrist as she reached Wesley.

"Don't you dare touch him! How could you, when he's blind?" she cried.

Blanche wrenched her wrist free, gaped at Julie; her rage dying on her. Then, suddenly, she began to laugh. She turned away, dropping into an arm-chair and shook with gleeful mirth.

"Oh, Howard, it's too comic," she gasped. "The little fool actually thought I was going to hit you."

Julie was dumbfounded. She felt herself turn white and then red. She was completely bewildered by Blanche's malicious laughter.

"Oh, run away, Julie," Blanche said, giggling. "You don't have to protect him. I wouldn't hurt him for anything."

Julie gulped, backed away, and as she was leaving the room the front door bell rang.

VI

Hugh Benton handed his hat and gloves to Julie, eyed her thoughtfully.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wesley are at home, I believe," he said, raising his pale eyebrows. "I'll find my way in." He entered the lounge, stood in the doorway, surveying the poker, the smashed vase and the pool of water on the carpet. His amber-coloured eyes looked quickly at Blanche.

"Why, hello, Hugh," she said gaily. "How nice of you to come. I've been losing my temper again."

"Ah, I'm sorry to hear that." Benton moved into the room cautiously. "Hello, Howard; glad to see you back. I'm sorry I wasn't in the office to welcome you. I took a long weekend at Brighton."

"They told me at the office," Wesley said stiffly. "I hope you enjoyed yourself."

"Pretty fair, thank you, pretty fair. Weather wasn't what it might have been."

"I do hope you stayed at a good hotel, Hugh, dear," Blanche said sweetly. "Those cheap little places are so horrid, I always think. No fires, no meals in bed, no butter : dreadful."

Benton winced.

"Yes, I know what you mean," he said, wandered further into the room. "Still it's difficult now : difficult times."

"For goodness' sake," Blanche said impatiently. "Where's Julie? Julie! Clear up this mess at once."

Julie came in hurriedly, began to pick up the pieces of glass. As she worked, she was aware that Benton stared at her with inquisitive, probing eyes.

"Have a drink, Hugh," Wesley said abruptly. "I'm not going out to-night. I have work to do."

"Oh, that's a pity. I was wondering if you two would care to dine at my club," Benton said. "I'll have a whisky I think. Can I persuade you to change your mind?"

"Brandy for me, darling," Blanche said as Wesley made his way to the sideboard. "I'd love to dine at your club, Hugh, my pet. It's such a lovely, dull, stuffy old place. Do let's, Howard."

"I have work to do," Wesley returned quietly.

"Well, I'll go without you then," Blanche said. "I don't see why I should be cooped up here all day."

"Please yourself," Wesley said, brought two glasses to the middle of the room.

Blanche took the drinks from him, and gave the whisky to Benton,

who caressed her fingers as she put the glass into his band.

"Oh, well, perhaps we'll make it some other day," Benton said uneasily.

"But I want to come to your stuffy old club. Howard never goes out anywhere."

"Well, if Howard doesn't mind."

"Why should I mind?" Wesley asked, groped his way to a chair and sat down.

Julie had cleared up the broken pieces by this time and quietly left the room, but stopped abruptly just outside the open door, her heart missing a beat, when she heard Benton say, "Oh, by the way, Blanche, I've never had the opportunity of examining this marvellous safe of yours. I was reading about it in the *Standard* to-night. They say it's the eighth wonder of the world. Won't you stop being mysterious and show it to me? I assure you I'm no burglar."

Julie flattened herself against the wall and listened.

"Why, of course," Blanche said gaily. "I didn't think it would interest you. It is rather fun." She gave a hard little laugh. "I locked Julie in it the other day."

"Why did you do that?" Wesley asked sharply.

"Oh, for fun. I wanted to see how she'd react. The little ninny fainted."

"That wasn't very kind, was it?" Wesley asked. "And rather dangerous, too."

"She didn't complain," Blanche said carelessly. "I must have a little joke sometimes. If she doesn't like it she can always leave."

"I should have thought it was difficult to get maids these days," Benton said mildly. "She struck me as a willing little thing."

"Just because she happens to be pretty in a cheap, sexy way both you and Howard stick up for her," Blanche said, a waspish note in her voice. "Howard's so infatuated with her, he sneaked back last night and spent the night with her alone."

There was a sudden silence, and Julie felt her face burn.

"Oh, come, Blanche." Even Benton sounded embarrassed.

"I'm not saying anything happened," Blanche said, and laughed shrilly. "Howard is past chasing girls. But Julie might have tried to chase him."

"Shall we drop this, Blanche?" Wesley's voice was sharp. "I've had quite enough of this nonsense for one day, and I don't think it's at all funny."

"Suppose we get back to the safe," Benton put in quickly, as if he saw a quarrel pending and was anxious to prevent it. "Will you let me see it? I promise not to tell anyone how it works."

"It's up to Blanche," Wesley said coldly. "We had agreed to keep the

combination to ourselves.”

“Oh well, if it’s like that . . .”

“Nonsense,” Blanche broke in. “Of course he must see it. We have no secrets from nice old Hugh, have we?”

“Show him if you want to,” Wesley said impatiently.

“I feel honoured,” Benton said, a tiny sneer in his voice. “May I finish my drink, and then perhaps you’ll show it to me.”

“We must all go along,” Blanche said, and giggled, “The safe’s in my bedroom and I must have a chaperon. Besides, Howard can tell you how it works.”

Julie waited to hear no more. Here was her chance. She went quickly down the passage to Blanche’s room. Where could she hide? She looked around for a likely hiding place. The cupboards were no use. Under the bed? Possible, but dangerous. The window recess? Yes, that was much the best place. Julie pulled back the curtains that screened the big windows, then darted back to the door to turn out the light and groped her way once more to the window, drew the curtains carefully and waited with beating heart.

After a few minutes the bedroom door opened and the light was switched on. By peering cautiously through the chink where the curtains met Julie had a clear view of the room.

Blanche and Benton stood before the quilted wall. Wesley wandered over to an arm-chair, and sat down, away from them.

“Well, this is it,” Blanche said. “The safe is hidden behind this wall, which slides back when I touch this spring. It’s Howard’s idea. He worked the whole thing out himself. He was frightfully clever with his hands before he was blind: now, of course, he’s just frightfully clever,” and she gave her tinkling little laugh. The sneer made Julie flinch, and she saw Wesley’s knuckles turn white. “The spring won’t work,” she went on, giving Benton a meaning smile, “unless a concealed pointer is set at a certain number. I’ll show you the pointer.”

“Have you turned off the alarm?” Wesley asked.

“Oh, no. I mustn’t forget to do that.” She turned to Benton. “If you touch the pointer before turning off the alarm the flat will be full of policemen before you can say Jack Robinson, or whatever it is you’re supposed to say.” She went over to the bed, fumbled behind the head and Julie heard a sharp click as Blanche turned down a concealed switch.

“Now the alarm is off,” she said brightly, came back to where Benton was standing.

“So that’s how you caught so many burglars,” he said, reached out and pulled her to him. Blanche seemed startled, looked quickly at Wesley who was sitting motionless in his chair, then she smiled and lifted her face for Benton’s kiss.

"The beasts!" Julie thought. "How could they when he is in the room with them?"

Blanche pushed Benton away, wagged a warning finger at him, but her face was animated and her eyes showed a naked desire that sickened Julie.

"The pointer is here," she went on, and pulled a square of the quilted wall out of its seating. Julie could just make out a small number dial set in the wall. "I turn the pointer to number three, press the catch with my foot, and the door opens."

The quilted wall had slid back to reveal the shiny steel door Julie had already seen.

"That's pretty neat," Benton said. His hand fumbled at Blanche but she pushed him away, frowning at him.

"There's another alarm fitted to the steel door," she explained. "Would you turn it off, Howard?" She turned back to Benton as Wesley got to his feet. "It's in the bathroom. Actually it looks like one of the electric light switches."

But Benton wasn't listening. He caught hold of Blanche the moment Wesley had groped his way into the bathroom. They strained together, his mouth crushed down on hers.

They stood there, their breath mingling, their eyes closed, swept away by the intenseness of their passion, and neither of them heard Wesley return. Julie put her hands to her face. It was horrible to see him standing there and to know he was unaware of what was going on. Then Julie felt a shiver run through her as she saw Wesley's fists clench and his mouth harden into a thin line. Could he possibly hear these two, lost in their beastliness?

Suddenly Blanche realized that he had returned, and she pulled away from Benton. She was shaking and had to grip his arms for support. He looked over his shoulder at Wesley and showed his teeth in an angry, frustrated grimace.

"The alarm is off," Wesley said in cold, flat tones.

Blanche was unable to speak for a moment, then with an effort, she said, "Howard had better tell you about the burglar trap, I never could understand how it works."

Benton took out his handkerchief and dabbed his face. "What's the burglar trap, old boy?" he asked. His voice was unsteady.

"I'll show you," Wesley said and moved towards the safe. "Will you open up, Blanche?"

Julie watched carefully. She saw Blanche turn down a switch by the side of the steel door. There was a sudden hiss of escaping air, the lights in the room flickered and the door slid back.

"Even if a burglar succeeded in getting so far, and none of them have up to now," Wesley said, "he would still be trapped if he entered

the safe. There's a concealed beam of light from a lamp on one side of the wall which is projected across the safe so as to fall on a photo-electric cell fixed to the opposite wall."

Benton leaned forward and peered into the safe.

"What happens then?" he asked, looked at Blanche and raised his eyebrows. She shook her head.

"The interruption of the beam by a person walking into the safe causes a decrease in the current through the cell," Wesley went on. "This in its turn causes an increase of the grid voltage applied to a triode valve and brings into operation a series of relays which switch on the thruster for closing the door."

"That's very ingenious," Benton said. "So if I enter the safe, the door shuts and I'd be trapped, is that it?"

"Yes, and if no one let you out, you'd suffocate," Wesley told him.

"I don't think I'll try it then," Benton laughed uneasily, dabbed his face again with his handkerchief. "There's some means of controlling the door I suppose?"

"Of course. You turn out the light that falls on the cell. It's safe then."

"But is all this necessary? It seems so elaborate and must have cost a tidy sum to construct."

"It's more than a toy," Wesley said, and moved away. "I shall get the cost back eventually on the reduced insurance rates. The insurance company was very impressed with it and consequently greatly reduced their rates. The furs alone are insured for thirty thousand and then there's Blanche's jewellery."

"I hadn't thought about the insurance," Benton said. "Yes, I see. It's remarkable, and thanks for showing it to me."

"And now let's go to your stuffy old club," Blanche said. "Do join us, Howard."

"I'm sorry," he said abruptly. "I have a lot of dictation to do. But you go."

"Well, if you're sure," Benton said, exchanged glances with Blanche. "Come as you are, Blanche. You don't need to change."

Blanche took down the mink coat from its hanger, slipped it on.

Will you close up the safe, Howard?"

"Yes," he said curtly, and waited for them to go.

Julie stepped away from the chink in the curtain and waited too, her heart pounding, terrified that Blanche would suddenly take it into her head to call her. But Blanche was too preoccupied with Benton to think of Julie.

When she heard the front door slam, Julie sighed with relief, and once again peered through the curtains. What she saw rooted her to the floor. Wesley had taken off his black-lensed glasses and was

moving about the room, no longer hesitant nor groping. By the brisk way he closed the safe, she realized he wasn't blind at all. She was so startled by this discovery that she gave a half-stifled exclamation. Wesley heard her. He turned quickly, stared at the curtained recess behind which she was hiding.

Without the black-lensed glasses, which she now realized had been as effective as a mask, he was a stranger to her and *his* odd, glittering eyes frightened her.

"You can come out, Julie," he said quietly.

CHAPTER FOUR

HOWARD WESLEY stood before the big brick fireplace in his study. Facing him, in an arm-chair, bewildered and flustered, sat Julie.

She was still dazed by the shock of discovering he could see, and she had followed him into his study, quite incapable of thinking of an excuse to explain why she had been hiding behind the curtains.

Although he appeared at *ease*, Wesley was strangely pale, and for some minutes neither of them said anything.

"You mustn't think I'm angry with you," Wesley said suddenly. "There's no need to be frightened."

She looked up. His eyes were compelling : dark and glittering as if all his being had come to focus in them.

"It's very important you should say nothing about my sight," he went on quietly. "For the *time* being no one must know I can see : not even Mrs. Wesley. I can't go into explanations, but I do want you to assure me you'll say nothing. Can I rely on you?"

She was surprised he didn't at once demand to know what she had been doing hiding behind the curtains, and at the same *time* she felt the return of confidence to know that he was asking her to keep a secret.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I won't say anything."

"Look at me, Julie," he went on, and as she met his eyes he smiled. "You will promise, won't you? It means success or failure in my work. That's as much as I can tell you. It's very important."

"Well, if it is so important perhaps I *can* make use of it in some way," she thought. "Perhaps that's why he hasn't asked me what I was doing behind the curtain."

"Yes, I promise," she said.

What was a promise anyway? She would see what was going to happen and act accordingly.

"Thank you." He thrust his hands into his pockets. "Let's talk about you. You're in some trouble, aren't you?"

She looked away, not saying anything.

"Now look, Julie, you'd better be frank. I know more about you than you think. You're here for a purpose, aren't you?"

She felt herself change colour. How did he know that? How much did he know?

"A purpose?" she repeated blankly. "What do you mean?"

"Here, read this. It came yesterday." He took from his wallet a sheet of notepaper and handed it to her.

She stared at the writing and went cold. Hewart! Hewart writing to

Wesley. The note was brief and sent the blood from her face :

Dear Sir,

Take warning, Harry Gleb is a fur thief. Julie Holland and Gleb are friends. If you don't watch out you'll lose your furs.

A Friend.

The old beast had said he would get even. He must have been watching her.

"Is it true you and this chap Gleb are after the furs?" Wesley asked quietly.

She hesitated for a moment, then decided to tell him the truth. He wanted her to keep his secret. It wasn't likely he would do anything to her. After the way that little beast Theo had treated her, she had no compunction for giving them away. It was her only chance to be free of them.

"They made me," she burst out, and taking out her handkerchief she pretended to cry. "You don't know what they're like. They threatened me with vitriol. They hit me. I didn't want to do it."

Wesley sat down.

"Now don't get upset. Let's begin at the beginning. Who wrote this note?"

"Sam Hewart. I—I worked for him," Julie said, still hiding her face with her handkerchief. "He owns a café in Hammersmith. I knew his café was a meeting place for crooks, but I thought I'd be able to keep clear of them. I wanted the money so badly. I've never had any fun. You don't know what it's like to be poor. All my life I've had to go without things I wanted."

There was a long pause, then Wesley said, "You mustn't go on like this, you know. If I can help you, I will, but I must know all the details first. Did you meet this chap Gleb at the café?"

"Yes," Julie said, and poured out the whole sordid tale : how Harry had made love to her, how he had promised to marry her, how he got her the job as Blanche's maid, and how Theo had called at the flat. She held nothing back.

"I know I shouldn't have come here," she concluded, dabbing her eyes, but keeping her face turned away so Wesley couldn't see she was pretending to cry. "But I swear I didn't know what they were planning to do until I saw the safe. Then when I tried to back out that awful Theo came and hit me. He threatened me with vitriol. He terrified me."

Wesley had listened to her story without interruption, and now when she had finished he lit a cigarette.

"There's nothing to worry about," he said, and smiled. "We'll find a

way out of it. Now look, it's getting late. I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. Will you order supper for two to be sent up from the restaurant while I see what can be done? I want a moment or so to think about all this. You run off and get some supper. Then we'll have another talk while we eat." He got up, walked over to the cocktail cabinet. "And you're going to have a drink. There's no need to be miserable. I'm very glad you've told me the whole story. I don't think you're to blame at all." As he mixed the two drinks, he went on, "Was that Gleb who was with you when I first met you?"

Julie flushed scarlet.

"I—I didn't think you could see me," she said. "I'm so ashamed I dressed up like that."

He laughed.

"You looked very beautiful, Julie," he said and handed her the drink. "One of these days you must dress again in something nice, but this time for my benefit."

She stared at him, startled, not expecting anything like this from him.

"It was Gleb?" he went on.

"Yes."

"All right, now run along. Take your drink with you. I want to think this over. Don't be too long about supper, will you?"

Julie's mind was in a whirl as she telephoned down to the restaurant for two suppers. While she was waiting for the trays to come up, she ran to her room and put on a bright red scarf and a red belt to offset her black dress. Looking at herself in the mirror she saw a young, lovely little face that pleased her. So long as she kept her looks, she thought, there was hope for her.

Back in the kitchen she finished the cocktail, which cheered her. Things were going well. Better than she had thought possible. He had seen her looking her best in Blanche's dress and he had remembered her in it.

"One of these days you must dress again in something nice," he had said, "and this time for my benefit."

"He's interested in me," she thought. "If I'm careful and play up to him it might be possible to ask him for anything. There's nothing he couldn't do for me if he wanted to. He has loads of money, and he can get rid of that French woman and Theo. He'll know how to handle them. And there's Harry, too. I'll never forgive him for letting that beast hit me. He must have known. I'll pay him out for that! I don't need him now if I'm careful with Wesley."

When she carried in the two supper trays she found him pacing up and down, his hands clasped behind his back. She still wasn't used to seeing him without the black-lensed glasses and he made her feel

nervous.

"All ready?" he said, taking one of the trays from her. "It looks good, doesn't it? You sit there where I can see you."

They sat at the table opposite each other. Under his friendly gaze she began to feel less nervous of him.

"We won't talk business until we've finished," he said. "It's not going to be so difficult as you think, but we'll go into that later. You're not going to be miserable any more, are you?"

"No," Julie said, not feeling miserable at all. To find out his reactions, she went on. "But I shouldn't really be here. Mrs. Wesley would be furious."

She saw his face harden.

"Mrs. Wesley has no right to complain," he said sharply. "She forfeited that right by her behaviour. You saw what went on?"

"Yes," Julie said. "I thought it was dreadful."

"Then don't let's talk about her," Wesley said. "I'll get you another drink."

There was an awkward silence while he mixed more drinks, but when he came back to the table he seemed to have recovered his calm and he smiled at her.

"I'm glad this has happened, Julie. I lead a lonely life : too lonely I'm discovering. I'm enjoying this. I haven't had supper with a pretty girl for years."

Julie was a little startled; she hadn't expected him to take the initiative so soon.

"I've been thinking about what you were saying," he went on, not appearing to notice her surprise, "about not having any fun. Tell me, Julie, what exactly is your idea of fun?"

"Being able to do the things you want to," she said promptly. "And what do you want to do?"

Again without hesitation, she said : "Have money and nice clothes. I want to go dancing, go to the best restaurants, have a car, buy what I like. Things like that."

He laughed.

"My dear Julie, what good are those things to you now? You're living in the past. That kind of fun is over and done with. It's the simple things of life that give fun now; things like good books, a garden, going for a walk, listening to music, things like that."

"That's where you're wrong," Julie thought. To him, she said, "If I had money I'd be able to have a good time. I know I should. I know how to get the things I want."

"Well, we'll see," he said, a little mysteriously, and began to ask her questions about her life at the café, drawing her out and listening with flattering attention to her description of the people who visited the

café.

By the time the meal had ended she was thoroughly at ease with him.

"All right, Julie," he said, pushing back his chair. "Let's get rid of these trays and then we'll get down to business." He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "I haven't long to give you. I have a great deal of work to get through before I go to bed."

When she had taken the trays into the kitchen and returned, he motioned her to the arm-chair and stood with his back to the fireplace, looking down at her.

"There's only one thing to do. We'll have to go to the police," he told her quietly.

"Oh, no," she said, alarmed at once. "We mustn't do that."

"Because you're frightened of this gang? I can understand that, Julie, but there's no other way. We must set a trap for them. We must round them all up and then you'll be safe. We can't do that without police aid."

"But suppose they find out?" Julie said with a shiver. "Suppose Theo gets away?"

"We'll take care they don't get away, and they won't find out. See them on Wednesday and tell them how the safe opens. I'll jot down the exact operation so you'll know how it works, and you can copy it. We must catch them red-handed. I'll see the police tomorrow. If Gleb wants you to help him in the actual robbery, you must do it. He must have no suspicion at all that we're waiting for him. You'll be all right, I'll see to that." He sounded so confident that Julie's courage stiffened.

"But if nothing happens to me they'll know I—I gave them away," she said uneasily.

"It'll be too late then for them to do anything. Now look, Julie, this is the only way to save yourself. You do see that, don't you?"

"Yes," she said reluctantly.

"All right. You carry on as if nothing has happened. See Gleb on Wednesday and try to find out when he intends to rob the safe. That is vitally important. We'll be ready for him. Do you think you'll be able to go through with it?"

"I think so," she said, thinking of Theo. Her voice lacked conviction. He looked at her for a long moment.

"Are you wondering what's to become of you when all this is over?"

Well, I don't know. I haven't thought. I don't know what I shall do."

"There's no need to worry," he said quietly. "I intend to do something about that if you will let me. I want to give you an opportunity to find out if your idea of fun is really what you want." He thrust his hands into his pockets and continued to look at her searchingly. "I've been married for six years, Julie. I've had no love

nor tenderness during those years. I've been blind for three years. Life has been pretty drab for me, and now I have recovered my sight I'm going to change all that. You're very lovely. I'm tired of leading a life without a woman. I need someone like you. Forgive me if I'm blunt. Do you follow what I'm getting at?"

She could scarcely believe her ears, and stared at him, blood rising in her neck and face.

"I'll never marry again," he went on. "But I could give you security, your own home, and I would settle a thousand a year on you. I wouldn't bother you a great deal and I believe we could make each other happy."

She realized he was serious. A home of her own ! A thousand a year! She was quick to realize what this meant. It was his price for her silence. He was offering her this to be sure she wouldn't tell anyone he could see. She was sure of that, but that made no difference to her rising excitement. For this was what she wanted; what she had longed for and hadn't thought possible. She had to control herself not to betray her astonished delight.

"Think it over, Julie," he was saying. "There's plenty of time. We have other things to do first. But I thought I would let you know what's been going on in my mind. Ever since I first saw you I have been thinking of this."

"No, he's lying," she thought. "I don't care. If he wants my silence he can pay for it."

"I—I don't know what to say . . ." she began, but he waved her to silence.

"Then don't say it. Think about it. I'll talk to you again when this is over, but I wanted you to know that if you wished I would look after you. Now run along, Julie, I have work to do."

It was a pity he was so matter-of-fact about it all. If he had only made love to her it would have been so much easier. But he was so calm, distant and cold-blooded that she felt embarrassed. It was as if he knew she knew he was buying her silence, and didn't care.

II

When Julie had recovered from the surprise of Wesley's proposal everything else became of secondary importance. Even Theo drifted into the background of her mind as an unpleasant nightmare not to be thought of—anyway, not for the time being.

Wesley wanted her to be his mistress. He wanted to buy her silence. She was quite prepared to accept the terms. She would have in return for her silence security, money, clothes, a flat of her own, even, perhaps, a car. Wasn't he enormously wealthy? Hadn't he promised to give her a thousand a year?

It wasn't as if he was some horrible, fat old man who would paw her about and be jealous of her. He was marvellous. Even before he had made his suggestion she had been attracted to him.

She had to admit he was a little disappointing and undemonstrative. He scarcely spoke to her at breakfast the following morning. When Gerridge had left the room to collect some papers, he did say abruptly, "You're not worrying, are you?"

"Oh no . . . not now," she said and smiled at him, but there was no answering smile. The face, partly hidden by the black-lensed glasses was inscrutable.

"It'll be all right," he said. "I wanted to know you hadn't changed your mind," and he went from the room.

But if his attitude was disappointing there were plenty of nice things to think about. "I wonder where I shall live. He might find me a flat in Mayfair. It's marvellous how everything has turned out. Only seven months ago I was working in a tuppenny library, and now I'm to have a place of my own and a thousand a year!"

Blanche's bell shattered this day-dreaming.

"Well, it won't be much longer now," Julie thought as she went along the passage to Blanche's room. "Then I'll have a maid to wait on me."

Blanche was in a poisonous mood. Julie could see that the moment she entered the room.

"Get my bath," Blanche said curtly, "and don't crash about the room like an elephant. I've a splitting headache."

Julie didn't say anything. She went into the bathroom and ran the water. Returning to the bedroom, she found Blanche out of bed and pacing the floor.

"You're to leave at the end of the week," Blanche snapped. "I don't want any arguments. You're to go."

Julie could have laughed. As if she wanted to stay when a new life was waiting for her.

“Yes, madam,” she said, so cheerfully that Blanche stared at her in furious astonishment.

“And if you try to make mischief you’ll be sorry for it,” Blanche said. “Get out of my sight!”

Some time later, Julie heard Blanche go out and she heaved a sigh of relief. She now had the place to herself, and deciding she wouldn’t do any more housework she went into the lounge, settled herself in a comfortable arm-chair, and read the newspaper.

“In a little while,” she told herself, “this is going to be my usual routine. I shan’t have anything to do except enjoy myself. I may as well get used to it now.”

She lit a cigarette, put her feet up on another chair and made herself comfortable.

But after a while she became restless, and finally decidedly bored. She tried to interest herself in a novel she found on the occasional table near-by, but it didn’t hold her for long. She put on the wireless, but the boisterous strains of a military band soon irritated her and she turned it off.

She felt lonely. The flat depressed her, and she began to wonder if the new life Wesley was offering her would be such fun after all.

“It’ll be different when I have a place of my own,” she thought, trying to reassure herself. “I can spend hours trying *on* clothes and making myself look nice. Then there’ll be the shops to look at, and, of course, I needn’t get up until late.”

But she knew at the back of her mind that there was nothing worth looking at in the shops, and she never really cared for lying in bed once she was properly awake.

By lunch-time she was thoroughly depressed, and for the sake of something to do she settled down to clean the silver.

It was extraordinary then how quickly the time passed, and she was irritated.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” she told herself. “I’ve got to get out of this slavish habit of working to pass the time. It’s ridiculous.”

Blanche returned a few minutes after five o’clock and sat in the lounge with the novel that Julie had tried to read. Hearing restless movements, Julie guessed Blanche was as bored with herself as Julie had been with herself. The novel apparently didn’t hold her either.

“Perhaps I’d be happier in a job,” Julie told herself. Then, realizing that this was against all her principles, she went on :

“That’s ridiculous, of course. I don’t want a job. That’s what I’m trying to escape from. It’s money really. If I had money I could pass the time all right. I could go to the cinema every afternoon. There’d be dances and a musical show now and then. It’s being stuck in this flat without money that bores me. I wonder where she’s been to-day?”

The sound of an orchestra came floating out of the lounge and then Blanche's impatient, "Oh, damn the thing and the wireless was turned off.

Blanche's obvious boredom thoroughly depressed Julie.

"If she doesn't know what to do with herself with all her money," she thought, "will it be the same for me? The trouble is there isn't any fun these days. Howard was right. We do have to find a new standard of life."

She wished Wesley would return. If she could get him alone for a few minutes he might give her some proof that he was fond of her. She felt that at least would be some consolation for a depressing day. She did hope he wasn't going to continue to be so impersonal. He had been so cold-blooded about the whole business. Then there was this extraordinary secrecy about his sight. Why was he pretending that he was blind? She didn't believe that it had to do with his work. She had an uneasy feeling that there was something a little sinister about his pretended blindness and it worried her.

She became aware that Blanche was speaking on the telephone, and because she felt uneasy she went to the door and listened.

Blanche was speaking to Benton.

"I can't tomorrow night, darling," she was saying in her clear, querulous voice. "No, I have to go with Howard to that ghastly dinner at the Everitt's. And I'm so bored I could scream." She paused, then went on : "Absolutely nothing. I went to the cinema this afternoon. No, rotten, but I just didn't know what to do with myself. It's all very well for you. You have your dreary old factory. Now look, Hugh, can't you raise some money? I'm getting sick of this life. I'd get a divorce if you'd only put your beastly money affairs in order. Well, do something. You don't expect me to go on like this much longer. You don't want to live on my money, do you? I think I'm being very reasonable. It's not as if I'm asking you to keep me; only yourself, darling. If you could do that I'd marry you like a shot." There was another long pause, then she said, "Oh, God! I've been talking with the door wide open. I suppose that little slut's been listening."

Julie quickly closed the kitchen door.

Later she heard Wesley come in, and she hurried down the passage to greet him.

"Julie?" Wesley asked as she came into the lounge. He was sitting in an arm-chair, a half-smoked cigar in his fingers. He didn't look at her and was behaving as if he were blind. This annoyed her. She felt she was entitled to more consider-ate treatment.

"Yes," she said shortly and came to stand before him.

"It's all right," he said, speaking softly. "The police agree you should go ahead as if nothing has happened. See these people tomorrow as

arranged and tell them how the safe opens.” He took a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to her. “Make a copy of that. It explains the whole thing. We don’t want them to become suspicious. The police are anxious to catch them taking the furs away. Try to find out when they’re going to break in. There’s nothing for you to worry about. The police won’t take action against you.”

“I see,” she said, and waited hopefully. She wasn’t interested in the robbery. She was only interested in their future relations together. Why couldn’t he talk about that?

“You’re not frightened?” he asked sharply, mistaking her silence for hesitation. “You can go through with it?”

“Oh yes, of course I can,” she said, then blurted out, “I—I’ve been thinking about what you said last night—about you and me.”

He got quickly to his feet.

“Not now, Julie. Let’s get this business over first. And don’t say anything to Mrs. Wesley about the burglary. She is not to know. Do you understand?”

“Oh, damn the burglary,” Julie thought angrily, said: “I won’t tell her.”

“That’s right. It would be better too if we weren’t found talking together. It won’t be for long, Julie.”

“Mrs. Wesley has told me to leave at the end of the week,” she said. “Will something be done before then?”

“If you could suggest Friday to Gleb for the night it would fit in well,” Wesley said. “I’ll arrange for us to be out that night.”

“Can’t he think of anything else but this damned burglary?” Julie thought. “He’s not thinking of me at all.”

“I’ll tell them,” she said. “But what will happen to me? I’ll need somewhere to go when I leave here.”

He made an impatient little movement with his hand. “That’ll be all right, Julie. I’ll see to that. I think you’d better run along now,” and he smiled.

“But there’s not much time,” Julie persisted. If he wasn’t going to be more practical, she would have to force him to make plans. “You said I was to have a flat.”

“Of course,” he said, and she sensed that he was controlling his patience with an effort. “Of course you’re to have a flat. We’ll have to see about that, won’t we?” He thought for a moment, his hands clenching and unclenching. “You have an afternoon off on Thursday? We’ll meet somewhere and see what we can arrange. Now run along, Julie. I have things to do before I go out again.”

It was unsatisfactory, but there was nothing else she could do. At least she had forced him—unwillingly, she could see that—to consider her for a moment. Well, she’d keep him up to it.

“All right, Howard . . .” she caught her breath, flushed. “I may call you Howard, I suppose?”

He had stiffened, and his black-lensed glasses were directed at her.

“Call me what you like,” he said, and there was a harsh note in his voice. “Run along, Julie.”

She turned at the door and looked at him.

He was motionless, his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, the light from the reading-lamp reflected in the black lenses of his glasses. There was a curious tenseness in his attitude, like a man who hears the whistle of a falling bomb and waits for the explosion.

III

Wednesday.

The morning had seemed interminable and Blanche had been particularly trying. She didn't wish to go with Wesley to the dinner that night and vented her temper on Julie.

Blanche's spite and tantrums and the thought that before long she would have to face Mrs. French made Julie jumpy, and she had a cold, sick feeling that remained with her all day.

It was a relief when Blanche left the flat for lunch. And as Julie was trying to settle down with the newspaper the telephone bell rang.

It was Harry.

"Julie? I've been trying to get you since Sunday. What's happened, kid? Every time I've rung that Wesley woman answered. I've been worried out of my mind, thinking about you. What did Theo do to you?"

Julie felt a wave of fury run through her.

"I don't want to talk to you, you coward !" she cried angrily. "You let that little swine knock me about, and you've done nothing about it. I hate you! I never want to see you again!" and she slammed down the receiver.

A moment or so later the bell began to ring again, but she didn't answer, and after a while it stopped ringing.

She was through with Harry. All right, she had loved him a little when they had first met. But now she had Howard, she wouldn't look at Harry.

She was startled to hear the front door bell ring, and wondered if Harry had come up to see her; or perhaps it was Theo. The bell rang again before she screwed up enough courage to answer the door. But it wasn't Theo; it was Detective Inspector Dawson.

"Afternoon," Dawson said gruffly and tipped his hat. "I want a word with you."

Julie turned red and then white. He was the last person she expected to see. She stood aside and he entered the hall.

"Bit of a change after the Bridge Café, isn't it?" he said, looking round. "Gone up in the world, haven't you?"

"Yes," she said in a small voice.

"Saw her Ladyship go out just now. She won't be back for a bit, will she?"

"No."

"That's all right then. Let's go somewhere where we can talk."

She took him into the lounge and again he looked round, nodding his bullet-shaped head.

“Very nice. No utility stuff here. Well, well, we can’t all be so fortunate. You’d better sit down.”

Julie sat down. She was glad to. Her legs felt weak.

“Mr. Wesley doesn’t want his wife to know about this business. Thinks she’ll be nervous. Shouldn’t have thought she was the nervous type from the look of her. Is she?”

“No,” Julie said. She was suddenly aware that she was twisting and untwisting her fingers, and hurriedly folded her hands in her lap.

“Funny things—husbands,” Dawson said shaking his head.

“Or does he think she’ll take it out of you?”

Julie stared. What was he getting at?

“I—I don’t know what you mean.”

His cold blue eyes studied her face.

“Never mind,” he said a little abruptly. “Now let’s have the story. Mr. Wesley told us more or less about you, but I thought I’d like to have it direct. Got friendly with Harry Gleb all of a sudden, haven’t you? The last time I asked you about him you didn’t know him.”

Julie again changed colour.

“I—I only got to know him—after you——” she stopped.

“Did you? All right, we’ll let that go. It doesn’t matter. I warned you to be careful of him, didn’t I? You showed some good sense in telling Wesley. We’d’ve got them sooner or later and we’d’ve got you too.”

Julie didn’t say anything. She was badly scared, realizing the escape she had had.

“Well, let’s start from the time you became friendly with Gleb,” Dawson went on. “Go on from there. I want all the facts. Don’t keep anything back.”

It was one thing to tell Wesley but quite something else to talk to the police. Julie hadn’t worked at the Bridge Café for over six months for nothing. She knew what happened to squealers.

“It doesn’t pay to talk,” Hewart had warned her. “. . . they found her in a back alley . . .”

But it was too late now. She would have to go through with it, and reluctantly she told Dawson what she had already told Wesley.

It wasn’t easy. Dawson watched her the whole time. He didn’t interrupt, but his eyes were coldly unsympathetic, and she felt he was making mental notes and would check up every detail of her story.

When she came to Theo, he thawed a little.

“Now he is a nice lad,” he said, with a wintry smile. “We’ll have to keep our eye on him. He got six months for bashing a girl a couple of years ago, and we nearly nabbed him for a vitriol job last summer, only his alibi was too good and the fool girl hadn’t the pluck to pick him in the parade. Yes, we’ll have to watch out for Theo—you watch out, too.”

Julie shivered.

"We've had our eye on Ma French, too," Dawson went on. "She's no fool either. That's a smart idea to run a domestic agency. It gives her an in to a lot of rich folks' houses. But this is the first time she's used a plant. You watch her and see you don't slip up. One mistake and she'll smell a rat. You're seeing them to-night?"

Julie nodded.

"All right. I'll have a man outside her place. If there's any trouble throw something through the window : your bag or something," Dawson said. "You're playing with fire, young lady. I don't want to frighten you, but if that mob thought you were selling them out they'd be very nasty."

"I know," Julie said.

"We don't want any mistakes. If we can catch 'em carrying the furs out it'll make a nice clean job of it. Let's have a look at the safe. You can have a dress rehearsal just to make sure you can open it. You can bet your last penny they'll want you to be there when they crack the job."

Julie took him into Blanche's bedroom.

Wouldn't Mrs. Dawson be tickled to have a room like this," Dawson said, looking round. "How does Wesley get on with his wife?" The question was shot at Julie and she became aware that Dawson was watching her closely.

"He's getting at something," she thought. "I'll have to be careful."

"All right, I suppose," she said. "Perhaps you'd better ask him."

Dawson stroked his long nose.

"Shouldn't think he'd tell me," he said with a dry smile. "He didn't strike me as a friendly individual. Where's the safe?"

Julie showed him.

"Let's see you open it. Don't forget to turn off the alarms. I don't want my people coming over here for nothing."

Julie found the switch behind the head of the bed and turned it off. She went into the bathroom and turned off both switches on the wall. It took her a minute or so to find the square in the quilted wall that hid the dial and pointer. She set the pointer to number three, pressed the catch and opened the first door.

"That's pretty good," Dawson said. "What happens next?" Julie opened the steel door by pressing the switch, turned off the light that fell on the photo-electric cell and stood back. "That's how it's done," she said, rather pleased with herself. Dawson eyed the furs and whistled.

"A beautiful haul," he said. "All right. That's smooth enough. Close up."

Julie shut the safe, turned on the alarms and followed him back to

the lounge.

“We want to find out when they’ll make the raid,” Dawson told her. “If you’re careful there’ll be nothing to worry about. But keep your eye on Theo. Gleb’s a smooth, smart alec, but Theo’s dangerous.”

“I know,” Julie said.

Dawson eyed her thoughtfully.

“And when this little party’s over, what are you going to do? Get into more trouble?”

Julie stiffened.

“I’m not,” she said coldly.

“That’s good.” The blue eyes were searching. “Is Mr. Wesley going to do something for you? He seems interested in you.”

“I have no idea. I don’t have to worry. I can always find myself a job.”

“Well, that’s something, isn’t it? You haven’t done so well up to now, but perhaps you’ve learned sense. Let’s hope so. You might not have a rich gentleman to champion you next time, young lady, so watch your step.”

He opened the front door and went off down the passage.

IV

"She should be here in a minute," Mrs. French said, with an impatient glance at the clock. "Theo's watching her. I don't think there'll be trouble."

Harry Gleb picked his teeth with a pin. There was a worried look in his eyes although he took pains to appear at ease.

"I don't like Theo," he said. "One of these days you'll be sorry you took him on."

Mrs. French gave an impatient grunt.

"What's the matter with him? You're always on about him. I'm sick and tired of hearing you grouse."

Harry eyed her, put the pin back in his coat lapel, sat forward.

"He's unreliable," he said, tapping the desk with a manicured nail. "He's dangerous. He's like a rat : corner him and he'll bite."

"He's too smart to be cornered."

Harry laughed.

"Theo—smart? Don't make me laugh. His brain is fossilized. All he thinks about is bashing his way out of trouble. One of these days he's going to do murder, and I don't want to be with him when he does it."

"You talk like an old woman," Mrs. French said coldly. "Theo's all right."

"A bloke who throws vitriol is never all right," Harry said. "He did six months for bashing a girl, didn't he? The cops have his fingerprints. If he makes one slip he's had it; and if the cops sweat him he'll squeal. Then what will you and me do?"

"I'm not worrying about him; I'm worrying about that Holland girl. She'll squeal if we don't watch her."

Harry rubbed his face, frowned.

"I'm getting out of this game after this job, Ma," he said. "It's getting too hot. I think I'll slip over to the States and have a look round. Let things cool off here."

"What's the matter with you?" Mrs. French asked sharply. "Getting cold feet or something?"

"Shouldn't be surprised," Harry said frankly. "I've had a good run. I've got a bit salted away and this job isn't going to be for peanuts. Might as well enjoy myself while I can."

"You haven't done the job yet," Mrs. French reminded him. The office door pushed open and Dana came in.

"Hasn't she come?" she asked, running her slim fingers through Harry's hair. "Hello, Harry, remember me?" He jerked his head away irritably.

"Cut it out," he said, took out a comb and tidied his hair. She

looked at him, glanced over at her mother who pursed her lips.

"Harry's quitting after this job," Mrs. French said. "Wants to go to America."

"So do I," Dana said. "We'll go together, won't we Harry?" He gave her a shifty look, smiled.

"It might be an idea," he said, without conviction. "But I haven't made up my mind yet."

A timid tap sounded on the outer door.

"That's her," Dana said, her lips tightening. "I'll go." She found Julie waiting in the dark passage.

"Come in," Dana said. "You're late, aren't you?"

"Am I?" Julie said curtly, "I don't know." Her heart was hammering and her throat was dry, but she had control of herself and apart from a steadily beating vein in her temple she looked calm and at ease.

"Hello, Jane," said a sneering voice behind her, and she flinched, looked quickly over her shoulder.

Theo materialized out of the darkness.

"Been trailing you all the evening, just in case you changed your mind," he said. His bad, stale breath fanned her face, and she shuddered.

"Come in," Dana said sharply. She disliked Theo, and wished her mother didn't employ him.

She led the way into the inner office. Theo trod on Julie's heels as he followed her.

"I bet you've been dreaming of me, Jane," he said, grinning. "Nice little nightmares that made you sweat."

Harry kicked back his chair and stood up.

"Shut your trap, you half-grown monkey," he said. "Who told you to talk?"

Theo eyed him evilly, slouched to a chair and sat down. "You'd better tell this bloke to lay off me," he said to Mrs. French. "I'm getting tired of him."

"Hello, Julie," Harry said with a nervous smile. "Come and sit down near me."

Julie gave him a look of contempt and turned her back on him.

Theo sniggered.

"That's pretty good. Give her a kick in the tail," he said.

"Shut up, both of you," Mrs. French snapped. "Here, you," this to Julie. "Sit down. Have you found out how the safe opens?"

Julie faced her.

"Yes," she said.

"Pity," Theo said. "I was looking forward to do you, Jane." Harry made a move to get up again, but Mrs. French waved impatiently at him.

"All right, sit down and tell us," Mrs. French said.

Julie pulled up a chair away from Harry and sat down. "I took notes. You'd better read them," she said.

Theo leaned forward.

"They'd better be all right," he said. "You try any tricks, Jane, and you'll be sorry."

Julie recoiled before his vicious scowl.

Harry hit Theo across his mouth with the back of his hand. Theo and his chair went over backwards. For a second or so he lay sprawled on the floor, stunned. Then he began to swear, his face vicious with rage. His hand went to his hip pocket and he dragged out a small automatic pistol. But Harry was ready for that. He kicked the gun out of Theo's hand, picked it up and put it on the table.

"I warned you," he said, glaring down at Theo. "When I say shut up, I mean shut up. And don't try to pull a gun on me again, you cheap little gangster."

Theo got slowly to his feet. There was a look in his eyes that frightened Julie. He touched his nose and mouth with the back of his hand, then slouched over to the settee under the window and stretched out on it. His silence was more chilling than a display of temper.

Mrs. French glanced at him, picked up the gun and put it in her bag.

"How many times have I to tell you not to carry guns?" she demanded. Her bright eyes revealed her rage. "Are you carrying a gun, Harry?"

Not likely," Harry said, still glaring at Theo. "I'm not a kid like wet-ears over there. I've never carried a gun and I never will. I'm not soft in the head."

Mrs. French grunted.

"I'll talk to you later," she said to Theo.

Theo pursed his lips but said nothing. He stared up at the ceiling, hate in his eyes.

Julie watched all this with fascinated horror. The sight of the gun had turned her cold.

"All right," Mrs. French said. "Let's get down to business. Where's this paper of yours?"

Julie produced a sheet of paper covered with her neat writing and put it on the desk.

Mrs. French read it through and Harry stood behind her, reading over her shoulder.

"Two alarms," Harry said, and whistled. "They're not taking any chances. I said I thought it was a photo-electric cell. This is fine; just what we want."

Mrs. French looked searchingly at Julie.

"And you're sure you can open it?"

Julie nodded.

"How did you find out all this?"

"Mrs. Wesley gave a demonstration to a friend of hers. I was hiding in the room," Julie said.

"Good for you," Harry said and smiled at her, but she looked away. She knew he was trying to be friendly, but she hated him and there was nothing he could do now that would change her feelings towards him.

"All right," Mrs. French said, and laid down the paper. Now we can make a start. To-day's Wednesday. I'll be ready by the weekend. What are they doing on Saturday? Do you know?"

"I'm leaving on Saturday," Julie said. "Mrs. Wesley has given me notice."

They all looked at her; even Theo raised his head and stared with intent concentration at her.

"Why?" Mrs. French demanded.

"She doesn't like me," Julie said. "It wasn't any particular thing I did."

"You've got to be there when we do the job," Mrs. French said. "You're in this up to the neck. Friday, then."

"Why can't you leave me alone?" Julie said, thinking it would be wiser to put on a show of reluctance. "I've told you how the safe opens. I won't do any more."

"You'll do what I tell you. You can't get out of it now, so you may as well make the best of it. We'll take care of you. Harry will tie you up before he leaves. So long as you keep your head they can't pin anything on you. You'll get your share. It'll be worth five hundred to you. When the police question you, tell them three men came to the front door, grabbed you and tied you up. You didn't get a chance to see what they looked like, except they wore dark overcoats and slouch hats. Make up your own description. You're no fool, and stick to your story. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Julie said sullenly.

"All right." Mrs. French turned her attention to Harry. "Your job is to work with Julie, take the furs and put them in the service lift. Theo will be in the basement to receive them. There's room for a car in the back alley. It's only a step from the basement to the alley. As soon as you've sent the furs down, take the jewellery, tie Julie up and take the staff lift to the ground floor. We can go into the details about the exact time later." She shot Julie a hard look. "Think the Wesleys will be out on Friday?"

"I know they will," Julie said. "I heard them talking. They're going to dinner and a theatre."

"All right," Mrs. French said, looked across at Harry. "It's fixed for Friday at eight o'clock."

Harry nodded.

"Suits me," he said, but there was a lurking uneasiness in his eyes.

Any questions?" Mrs. French asked.

"I don't like leaving Julie in the flat when the job's done," Harry said. "You know what the police are. They'll smell it's an inside job. Think she'll stand up to them?"

"If she keeps her head it'll be all right," Mrs. French said shortly. "There's no other way."

"But if she doesn't?" Harry persisted. "Suppose she loses her nerve and talks. That'll let us out."

Theo suddenly sat up.

"She won't lose her nerve," he said. "That's the last thing she'll lose," and he began to laugh. The high-pitched, cracked laugh was vicious and degenerate.

"Shut up, you fool!" Mrs. French shouted, thumping the table.

Theo stopped laughing and looked across at Julie.

"What's so funny?" Harry demanded, glaring at him. "you'll see," Theo returned, looked again at Julie.

"Shut up," Mrs. French repeated, turned to Harry. "Don't pay any attention to him. He's stupid to-night. We'll have to take a chance on Julie keeping her head. We can't take her with us. They'll find us through her if we do."

Harry got to his feet.

"All right," he said, but he wasn't happy. "How do you feel about this, Julie? Think you can go through with it?"

"You don't have to worry about me all of a sudden," Julie snapped. "You were quick enough to drag me into this. Why the sudden concern?"

"If that's how you feel," he said, flushing. He turned away. "Anything else?"

"There are other details but we can fix them up between now and Friday. The main thing's settled," Mrs. French said. "Friday at eight o'clock."

"I'll be running along then," Harry said, and moved to the door.

"I'll come with you," Dana said, pushing back her chair. "I've got to see a man," Harry said, shaking his head. "Sorry. Good night all," and he went out.

Julie felt a little thrill of delight that Harry should have snubbed Dana like this. Not that she cared, she told herself, she was through with a cheap crook like Harry. But it was nice to see Dana put in her place.

She got up.

"I can go now, I suppose?"

Mrs. French nodded.

And Julie, watch your step. If you try anything smart you'll be sorry. Theo's watching you."

Julie went out of the room without a glance at either Dana or Theo. Her heart was pounding, but she was triumphant. She had found out when they were going to attempt the robbery. Now there was nothing else for her to do but to wait. The responsibility had shifted from her to the police.

She walked quickly along the deserted street, crossed New Bond Street and made her way towards Berkeley Square.

Suddenly she became aware of footsteps behind her and she looked hastily round.

Harry came out of the shadows, took her elbow and moved along at her side. She tried to shake him off, but he retained his grip.

"Now don't be mad with me, kid," he said. "It wasn't my fault. I know that rat Theo had a go at you, but I found out too late to stop him."

She wrenched her arm free, faced him.

"Get away from me!" she said furiously. "I don't want to have anything more to do with you."

He shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

"Don't go on like that, Julie," he said. "I've been thinking about you. Look, kid, let's get this job over and then let's go to the States. I'm sick of this life. I've been thinking a lot recently. Why shouldn't you and me hook up? Come on, give me a smile, and say you'll come with me."

She eyed him up and down and nearly laughed. The idea of her marrying this cheap spiv, she thought, when she was going to have a West End flat and a thousand a year of her own! She wouldn't marry him now if he were the last man on earth.

"Get away from me!" she repeated. "I hate you. You're nothing but a cheap crook," and she turned on her heel and I walked quickly down the street.

He came after her and jerked her round.

"What's the matter, Julie? You love me, don't you? We mean something to each other. I'm sorry, kid. I know I've got you into this mess, but I'll make up for it."

"Leave me alone ! How many more times have I to tell you I never want to see you again?"

He stared at her, refusing to believe her.

"Don't you want to go to the States?" he asked persuasively. "I'll give you all the fun in the world. Come on, kid, give me a kiss and let's make it up."

He reached for her, and stung to anger by his supreme confidence in himself, Julie slapped his face.

“And now leave me alone!” she cried, and turning, she ran down the dark street.

Harry stood still, his hand to his face, a blank, hurt look in his eyes. No woman had ever treated him like this before. It was a shock to him; a shock to his pride. He drew in a deep breath. Well, he wasn’t going to take no for an answer. He would do everything in his power to win her back. No other woman he had known had been able to resist him; Julie wasn’t going to be the exception. He loved her. When the job was over, and she was away from that flat, she’d be more reasonable, he told himself. It was living in luxurious surroundings that had gone to her head. She’d be all right when she had a place of her own again. She’d want to go to the States with him after a week or so of that.

He shoved his hands deep into his coat pockets and walked quickly away into the darkness.

Theo, who had been watching all this from a shop doorway, leaned forward and spat in the gutter.

CHAPTER FIVE

FROM the moment she had met Wesley in the lobby of the Piccadilly Hotel, Julie had been acutely uncomfortable. And she had been so looking forward to this outing. Up to the moment of meeting him the afternoon had promised well. She was excited and was wearing her smartest outfit. She had had the excitement of making sure Theo wasn't following her; and dodging from bus to taxi had added spice to what she imagined was going to be a thrilling afternoon. But she had not anticipated how embarrassing it would be to go out with a man who appeared blind. It wouldn't have been so bad if Wesley had been blind, but knowing he was pretending she was embarrassed by the way people looked at him, made way for him and even offered to help him. There had been a long queue for a taxi outside the hotel, but immediately Wesley appeared, his hand on Julie's arm, the commissionaire had insisted he should go to the head of the queue, and no one in the queue had raised an objection.

It seemed to Julie, who was a little superstitious, that it was wicked of Wesley to act in this way. She had an uneasy feeling that God would suddenly rise up in wrath and strike him blind to teach him a lesson.

As the taxi drew away, Wesley seemed to sense her embarrassment, and smiling said : "Poor Julie; I'm afraid you're very uncomfortable. But don't worry, you'll get used to it."

"But must you do it?" she asked angrily. "Isn't it unfair?"

"When you play a part, Julie, you must be thorough," he returned, a sudden sharp note in his voice. "If we are to get along together you must accept me as you find me."

Nothing further was said until the taxi driver drew up outside Fowler & Freebody, Estate Agents, in Duke Street.

Mr. Fowler appeared in person and took them into his office.

Wesley explained what he wanted, and Julie caught Mr. Fowler's startled glance. She saw at once he guessed what was in the wind, and hated him for the shocked expression that jumped into his eyes. But he produced particulars of two flats that he thought might possibly suit. One of them was in Berkeley Square and the other in Vigo Street.

They took a taxi and saw both flats. Julie immediately fell in love with the Vigo Street flat. The bedroom, Julie thought, was too elegant for words. There were silver stars painted on the dark blue ceiling and a pink-tinted mirror covered the whole of one of the long walls.

Wesley stood quietly by the door while Julie examined the room. They were alone and he had taken off his glasses. There was a cynical

expression in his eyes as he watched her run excitedly backwards and forwards, through to the bathroom that delighted her and back to the bedroom again.

"I think it's marvellous," she exclaimed. "Much better than that stuffy old place in Berkeley Square."

"So long as you're pleased, Julie. But I think this is cheap and ghastly," Wesley said, shrugging. "It's a tart's place. Julie."

"I don't care!" she snapped, reddening. "I want it."

He studied her for a moment, then shrugged.

"All right, Julie, if you want it, have it."

She was angry with him now. He had taken the gilt off the gingerbread by his criticism. A tart's place! What did he know about tarts! It was lovely. The stars on the ceiling were marvellous. Lying in bed, she could imagine she was looking at the sky. Well, he wasn't going to spoil her pleasure. She had to live in it. If he didn't like it, he could stay away.

"Yes, I want it," she said.

"Then we'll go back to the agents and fix it up."

When they had left the estate agents, Wesley gave her the front door key.

"There you are, Julie. The key to your new home. I hope you will be very happy there."

She took the key without a word of thanks. She was still angry with him.

"Now, I suppose I'd better get you some clothes," he told her. "Those days are over for you. No more Bridge Cafés, Harry Glebs or the Black Market for you. You understand that, don't you?"

"I suppose so," she said reluctantly. He was right. She would never again be able to meet any of the old gang. Sooner or later the word would get around that she had talked. They wouldn't want her once they knew that.

He bought her clothes that astonished her. They were severe and plain and beautifully tailored. She didn't like them, wanting something flamboyant, like the lovely clothes Blanche wore, but Wesley didn't even consult her, and she had to admit when she studied herself in the mirror that she looked awfully smart and sophisticated. Wesley's approving nod, when the fitter had gone from the room, pleased her.

But when he bought her a mink coat her rapture knew no bounds, and she immediately forgave him for his criticism of the fiat. She wanted to wear it at once, but he gave instructions for the clothes and the coat to be sent on Saturday afternoon to the Vigo Street flat.

"It'll be something for you to look forward to," he said as they left the building. "And now I must get back to the factory. I hope you had

a nice afternoon, Julie.”

The gift of the mink coat had so thrilled her that she wanted to be nice to him. She was well aware that when a man gave a girl a costly present like that he expected payment, and she was ready to give payment.

“Wouldn’t you like to come back to my flat, Howard?” she asked, and gave him an inviting look.

He gave her a quick, startled glance, smiling uneasily and patted her arm.

“Not now, Julie. I must get back to work. Good-bye,” and he climbed quickly into the waiting taxi, which drove away, leaving her staring after it.

“The damned stuffed shirt,” she thought angrily. “All right, if he doesn’t want me, I don’t care. I won’t be so free next time. When he’s in the mood, I won’t be.”

The plain-clothes detective, who had patiently followed them all the afternoon, was relieved to see Wesley go. The afternoon had been an exhausting one, and he was anxious to return to headquarters and make his report.

“Now I wonder what his little game is,” he said to himself as he set off after Julie. “Looks as if he’s setting her up in a love nest.” He studied Julie’s slim legs as she hurried along in front of him and sighed. “Can’t say I blame him. For a blind man, he’s certainly picked himself a nice piece.”

Julie, unaware she was being followed, headed for Piccadilly. The evening was before her. She felt in the mood to celebrate.

II

You could get a drink at the Harlequin Club at any hour of the day or night if you didn't object to paying treble the usual price for it.

Harry Gleb had just come from Mrs. French's office and he felt in need of a drink. The final details of the robbery had been arranged and he had left Mrs. French and Theo together to discuss the type of car to be used. The more Harry thought about the coming robbery the less he liked it.

"I've got cold feet," he thought, as he climbed the stairs that led to the club. "That's what's wrong with me. Well, this is the last job I'll pull; anyway for some time. I've had about enough of it."

He entered the gaudy little lounge, nodded to the gimlet-eyed doorkeeper and went straight to the bar. At this hour—it was a few minutes past four-thirty—there were in the bar only tarts sitting on stools, sipping whisky, and an elderly man in a corner, reading the evening paper, a plain gin on the table before him.

The barman brightened when he saw Harry. He was bored with talking to the tarts, and hoped Harry would be more entertaining. But Harry wasn't in a talkative mood. He ordered a double whisky, grunted when the barman tried to engage him in conversation, and moved away from the bar to sit in solitude at a table by the window.

He was thinking of Julie. All night he had thought of her, and a sleepless night didn't agree with him. He wanted her; wanted her as he had never wanted any other woman before.

"I was a mug to have mixed her up in this business," he told himself. "If I'd've kept her clear of it there'd've been no trouble with her. And as soon as I'd picked up the dough we could have hopped on a boat and started a nice little honeymoon in the States. Now, I've got my work cut out to win her round. Don't see how I'm going to do it. We're doing the job tomorrow, and I'll have to keep clear of her from then on. The cops'll be watching her night and day." He sipped his whisky and brooded. "All very well for Ma French to say leave her in the flat. But it's cock-eyed, that's what it is; cock-eyed. The thing to do is to take her with me; hide with her somewhere until things cool off a bit, and then slip out of the country." He frowned out of the window. "But will she come with me? If she doesn't, what's she going to do?" He finished his whisky and was about to order another when he remembered that to-day was Julie's afternoon off. "Now I wonder what she's up to," he thought. "Mooching round the West End looking at the shops, I'll bet a dollar. Maybe I'll run into her if I have a look round." He pushed back his chair and stood up. "That's what I'll do. I'll have a look for her. Maybe I can persuade her to see reason."

Nodding to the barman, he left the club and, reaching Piccadilly, began to walk slowly towards Park Lane. He walked as far as Hyde Park Corner, then retraced his steps. As he was passing the Berkeley Hotel he spotted her across the street, walking towards the Circus.

"That's what I call a real bit of luck," he said to himself. "I knew she'd be around here somewhere. Pretty kid; looks as smart as paint." He grinned to himself, aware of a surge of excitement going through him. "Blimey !" he thought. "I've got it bad. Wouldn't have thought I'd ever chase after a bride like this; shows what love can do to a fella."

He darted across the road as soon as the traffic began to slow down for the traffic lights, and hurried along behind Julie. The plain-clothes detective, who was tiring rapidly of following Julie, recognized Harry and whistled softly.

"Now where did he spring from and what's he want?" he wondered and dropped behind, letting Harry go on ahead of him.

Harry was too intent on pursuing Julie to notice the detective. He overtook Julie as she waited to cross the Circus.

"Hello, kid," he said, raising his hat. "I want to talk to you. There's been a change of plan."

Julie started, looked angrily at him.

"Well, I don't want to talk to you," she snapped. "Go away."

"Don't be daft," Harry returned, taking her arm. "This is business. Come on, I've got to talk to you. There's a club round the corner where we won't be disturbed."

Julie hesitated. If Mrs. French had decided to postpone the attempt she would have to warn Wesley.

"Oh, all right then," she said crossly, and went with him along Regent Street.

Neither of them said anything further. Julie didn't want to talk to him. Meeting him had spoilt her plans for the evening. She had decided to go to a cinema and have supper down West before returning to Park Way. She didn't want company. She wanted to dream about her new home and her mink coat.

When they entered the Harlequin Club, which was empty now, Harry asked her what she would like to drink.

"Nothing," she said shortly, and sat down at a corner table. "I don't want anything from you."

He pulled a face, went over to the bar and ordered a double whisky which he brought to the table.

"Julie, you're not still mad with me, are you?" he asked, sitting down opposite her. "I'm sorry this business ever started, but we can't back out now."

She made an impatient movement.

"You said you wanted to talk business. Say what you want to say

and let me go.”

He studied her and, seeing the cold, unfriendly look in her eyes, realized she didn't love him anymore. The discovery deflated him.

“It's about leaving you at the flat when the job's done,” he said uneasily. “I don't like it, kid. It's not safe. I want you to come away with me. We'll hide up somewhere and then hop a boat to the States.”

She stared at him as though she thought he were mad.

“I'm not frightened of being left,” she said sharply. “And I'm certainly not going with you. I told you last night, I don't want anything more to do with you.”

“Now look, Julie,” he said, shifting forward on his seat. “I've got you into this mess. I want to get you out of it. I'm crazy about you, kid. Honest; I wouldn't be crawling like this if I wasn't serious. I love you. I'd do anything for you. If I leave you in the flat the cops will be all over you. They'll pin something on you when they know you worked for Hewart.

Even if they don't, what are you going to do? You can't live on three quid a week. Come with me and I'll give you a smashing time. Look, I'm sick of this life. I only want a bit more money and I'll be in the clear. After this job, I'm through. I'm going straight and I want you with me. Honest, Julie, I love you so much I can't live without you.”

It wasn't what he said, but the way he said it that impressed her; and suddenly she turned sick and cold because she realized something she had refused to realize before. She had once loved him; had given herself to him; and now she was planning to betray him to the police. While she had been frightened it had seemed completely unreal: planning something that wouldn't happen. But now, seeing him before her, hearing him say he loved her and knowing that before long he would be in the hands of the police brought the facts home to her like a blow in the face. For a brief moment she nearly blurted out the truth; nearly told him she had given him away to the police, but the thought of Theo stopped her. There was no turning back. If she admitted that she had told the police, Theo would come after her. There would be no safety for her now until the whole gang was under lock and key.

“No!” she said wildly. “I wouldn't ever go with you. But, Harry, I'm warning you; don't do it. Go away before it's too late. You won't get away with it. I know you won't. Please—please don't go through with it !” And before he could stop her she had jumped to her feet and darted to the door.

Harry stared after her, a cold tingle going up his spine. Then he kicked back his chair and rushed after her. He caught her on the stairs and grabbed hold of her.

“Julie ! What do you mean? What do you know?”

She tried to wrench herself free, but he pulled her round so he could look into her eyes.

“You haven’t talked, have you?” he demanded, shaking her. “You haven’t squealed?”

“Oh, no,” she gasped, suddenly frightened of him. “It’s just I—I’m scared. It’s too dangerous. I feel it won’t come off.” Then, as his suspicious eyes searched her face, she exclaimed, “Let go of me! Do you hear? Let me go!”

“Hey, miss, is this fella annoying you?” asked a hard voice from the bottom of the stairs.

They looked into the lobby. A big man in a slouch hat and raincoat was looking up at them. Harry recognized him as a plain-clothes man from Savile Row station and he hurriedly released Julie.

“It’s all right,” Julie said, scared. She ran down the stairs, passed the detective and on into the street.

“Watch it, fella,” the detective said to Harry. “Or you and me’ll take a little walk.”

Harry said, “I’ll watch it,” and went back into the club.

III

While Harry was trying to persuade Julie that he loved her, Mrs. French was discussing the last details of the robbery with Theo. She was sitting at her desk by the window. The waning sunlight reflected on her ear-rings, making dancing patterns on her blotter.

Theo sprawled in the arm-chair facing her, his furry hat crushed down over his ears. He never seemed conscious of his looks. It didn't cross his mind that he could improve his appearance if he made an effort. He seemed to go out of his way to make himself look as moronic and hideous as he could. Sitting there, his ears bent down under the hat, a long greasy strand of hair across his eyes, a sullen, hateful expression on his fat, spotty face, he looked like an exaggerated cartoon of a gangster.

Mrs. French had already arranged about what car should be used for the robbery, and now a sudden silence fell between them. Mrs. French brooded out of the window, a cold look in her eyes. Theo picked his nose, twisting his mouth out of shape as he dug a dirty finger-nail into his nostril.

"There's nothing else, is there?" Mrs. French asked suddenly without looking round.

Theo grinned to himself.

"There's the girl —Julie Whatsername," he said, and stretched his legs out and regarded his dusty shoes thoughtfully. "Harry's soft on her."

"I wonder if she'll talk." Mrs. French said as if she were thinking aloud. "This is a big job. It'll be worth eight thousand apiece. If she talks . . ."

"You're not going over all that again, are you?" Theo asked sharply. "I said I'd fix her : I will."

Mrs. French watched a car draw away from the kerb opposite. The girl who was driving had a cigarette-holder nearly a foot long clenched between her teeth. Mrs. French thought she looked ridiculous.

"But now Harry's gone soft on her I'll need help," Theo went on.

Mrs. French turned her head, surveyed him with bleak eyes. "What kind of help?"

"The way I figure it," Theo said, "is like this." As he spoke, he undid his waistcoat, pushed his hand through the opening of his shirt and scratched his ribs viciously. "Harry pulls the job and sends the furs down to me by the service lift. Then he ties the girl up and leaves her. He comes down the front way with the sparklers. I'll put the furs in the car, but Dana must do the driving. It's a three-handed job now,

see?"

Mrs. French saw all right, but she made out she didn't.

"I don't want Dana mixed up in this," she said brusquely. "You've always driven before."

Theo stared at her.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded crossly. "I've got to look after the girl, haven't I?" His nails clawed at his ribs again.

"And just how are you going to look after her?" Mrs. French inquired.

"I'll come up the service lift, wait until Harry gets out, go in there, untie her and shove her in the safe. When they find her they'll think she got trapped like it says in that paper she gave us."

Mrs. French continued to look out of the window. "That's murder, Theo," she said, as if to herself.

Theo picked his nose.

"It'll be an accident," he said after a little thought. "Anyway that's how it'll look."

"I'm not saying it isn't a good idea," Mrs. French said. "I think it's smart. There isn't any other way we can be sure she won't talk. But I don't stand for murder, Theo."

Theo wasn't impressed. He took off his wreck of a hat, peered into it, found a crumpled packet of Player's Weights inside, selected one that was less greasy than the others, lit it, put his hat on again.

"I want to spend some of that dough," he said, blowing a long stream of smoke down his nostrils. "Like you said, if she talks I won't 'ave a fat lot of time for spending : nor will you or Dana."

"Or Harry," Mrs. French said generously.

"I don't care a lot what happens to Harry," Theo said. "I'd like to get even with that — —"

Mrs. French flinched.

"I won't listen to such language. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Oh, I am," Theo said, and began to scratch himself again.

There was another long pause, then Mrs. French said : "He's going to the States, anyway."

Theo sneered.

"Can't you get your mind off Harry? We're talking about the girl."

Mrs. French shook her head.

"I don't want to know anything about her. I don't stand for murder."

Theo eyed her a little doubtfully. He wasn't quite sure if she were serious or not.

"Don't I keep telling you it'll be an accident?" he persisted, swore under his breath as his skin began to irritate again.

"I don't want to talk about it," Mrs. French said shortly, added after a pause : "You'll have a bigger share than Harry and Dana. Another fifteen hundred."

Theo brightened and grinned to himself.

"Make it two thou while you're about it. It's worth that."

"Fifteen hundred," Mrs. French said obstinately. "I've got to explain to Harry."

"No you "aven't. We'll make the new split after I've done the job. He can't object then: it'll be too late."

"All right; two thousand," Mrs. French said.

Theo nodded.

"And Dana to drive?"

"I don't see why you can't drive." Mrs. French avoided Theo's eyes. "But if you say you can't I suppose Dana will have to do it."

"What are you going round the point for? We've got no witnesses. You want me to do it, don't you?"

"I said it was a smart idea," Mrs. French said cautiously. "I said it seemed to me it was the only way to stop her talking, but I also said I didn't stand for murder. Let's drop it, Theo."

"I still get the two thousand and Dana drives?"

Mrs. French nodded.

"All right," Theo said, getting to his feet. "You drop it. I'll think about it."

When he had gone, Mrs. French sat for a long time, staring out of the window. Then Dana came in.

"All alone?" she asked. "Theo gone?"

Mrs. French grunted.

"Got it fixed?" Dana went on, looking at her mother with questioning eyes.

"Everything," Mrs. French said abruptly.

"That Holland girl worries me," Dana said, sitting on the edge of her mother's desk. She massaged the red mark where her garter had bitten into her flesh above her knee.

"Don't let her worry you," Mrs. French returned, without turning from the window. "You'll have to drive the car." Dana's eyebrows shot up.

"Why? Can't Theo drive the car? Isn't that what was arranged?"

Mrs. French got to her feet.

"Theo says he's got something more important to do," she said and ear-rings bobbed in the sunlight. "I don't know what he's got to do and I'm not going to ask and I don't want you to ask either."

Dana stared at her for a moment, then she lost some of her colour.

"Now look, Mother, you don't mean

"Shut up!" Mrs. French said, and turned back to the window.

IV

On the following afternoon Detective Inspector Dawson was at work in his office when Wesley was announced. Dawson nodded to the police constable, pushed back his chair as Wesley came in.

"There's a chair just by you, Mr. Wesley," he said, signaled to the constable who pushed the chair against the back of Wesley's knees. Wesley sat down.

"Well, I hope you're ready for them this evening," Wesley said quietly. "I thought I'd look in just to check over any last-minute details."

"It'll be all right, sir," Dawson returned, sat down and stared thoughtfully at Wesley. "Everything arranged. There won't be any trouble."

"Now what in the world is a fellow like this doing fooling around with that Holland girl," he was wondering. "Not as if he could see her and be infatuated by her looks. She's a nice-looking girl; I'll say that for her, but there's nothing else to her. This chap's got a lot of money, plenty of education and culture. They've got absolutely nothing in common. I wonder what the idea is?"

He had been intrigued by the plain-clothes detective's report, but realized that it was no business of his. It had just so happened that in keeping an eye on Julie, Clegg had spotted what was going on between these two. Although it wasn't his business, Dawson couldn't help being puzzled and interested.

"You'll have a clear field," Wesley said after a moment's hesitation. "My wife and I are going to the theatre. I don't usually go to the theatre, but it's the only way I can get my wife away from the flat. I am most anxious she should know nothing of what's happening to-night." He made a quick impatient gesture. "She would insist on being there, and that would make things very difficult." He moved uneasily, went on : "You think no harm will come to Miss Holland?"

"None at all," Dawson returned. "She tells me they plan to leave her tied up when the robbery's over. Anyway, we'll be at hand and she's only got to scream."

"Exactly where will your men be?" Wesley asked.

"We'll have a couple in the hall. Two in the alley at the back, another two on the landing outside the flat, and two more on the roof. As soon as we know they're inside we'll throw a cordon right round the building. We're not taking any chances."

Wesley nodded.

"That sounds all right," he said, and got to his feet. "You won't be able to contact me until after the theatre. We're going to the

Hippodrome, but I don't suppose you'll want me. I'll ring you in the interval which I believe is around eight-forty. Will that do?"

"It should do," Dawson said. "But there'll be nothing to worry about."

"Thank you," Wesley said, offered his hand. "Then I won't keep you any longer. I'm sure you have plenty to do."

"Well, I keep pretty busy, sir," Dawson said, shaking hands. But this little job is a real holiday. It couldn't be better arranged for us. It's not often we get the chance of a tip-off like this, you know."

"Make sure they don't slip through your fingers," Wesley returned quietly.

"No fear of that. We'll have 'em all right."

"I suppose you'll want Miss Holland as a witness?" Wesley asked. "I'd prefer not if you can avoid it. I don't want any publicity about her if I can help it. Is it necessary, do you think?"

"Was this why he's come?" Dawson wondered, said, "I don't think we'll need her. If we nab them with the goods it'll be plain sailing. We'll need you, of course."

"Oh yes, that's quite all right," Wesley said. "You see, the girl has an odd background. But then you know all about that. I'd like her to have a fresh start if I could arrange it. If it gets known it was through her the gang was caught there might be trouble from her old associates."

"There might be," Dawson agreed. "I won't call her unless I have to, sir."

Wesley nodded.

"Good." Still he didn't make a move to go. "Inspector, Miss Holland interests me," he went on after a pause. "You're a man of the world and will know what I mean by that. I'm taking care of her when this business is over. So you see, the least publicity might be embarrassing."

"Well, that's hardly my business," Dawson said, taken aback. It was the last thing he expected.

"Oh, I know." Wesley smiled. "But she has been associating with criminals, hasn't she? I wouldn't want you to be interested in her when this is over. I shall look after her and see she doesn't get into any further trouble. I'll make her my responsibility."

"I wouldn't be interested in her unless she did get into further trouble," Dawson said, a shade coldly. "There was no need to tell me any of this, sir."

"But I wanted you to know. I hope I shall not be followed by a plain-clothes man in the future, Inspector," Wesley said, and his mouth tightened. "It is an experience I can well do without, and if repeated I shall take prompt action."

Dawson grimaced.

“Got me there,” he thought. “No wonder he’s been so frank. I suppose that blasted girl spotted Clegg.”

“That was an accident, sir,” he said quietly. “I must apologize. We were giving Miss Holland police protection and happened to run into something that didn’t concern us.”

“So it seems,” Wesley said. “In the future when your man sees Miss Holland and me together, will you instruct him to leave us alone?”

“I hope there won’t be any occasion to watch Miss Holland after this evening,” Dawson pointed out.

“Of course not,” Wesley said, and smiled. “I’ll telephone you some time this evening. Could your man kindly show me to my taxi?”

When he had gone, Dawson ran his thick fingers through his hair.

“I wouldn’t like to get on the wrong side of that chap,” he thought. “His bark is quiet enough, but I bet his bite is hell.” He went to the window to watch Wesley’s taxi drive away. “Don’t exactly blame him. He’s a good bloke; lots of guts; V.C. and blind. Well, if he gets a bit of fun out of that girl—good luck to him.”

And he settled down once more to his work.

V

Julie was pacing up and down in her room. It was a few minutes to seven o'clock, and in another hour Harry would arrive. The suspense of waiting was becoming unbearable. All the previous night and during the day she had tried to screw up her courage to warn him the police were waiting for him, but every time she moved to the telephone she remembered Theo's threat, and the ghastly photographs of the women he had shown her. If she saved Harry, Theo would come after her, and besides, Wesley wouldn't like it. Now that Harry had told her he loved her some of the old attraction she had had for him returned. If Wesley had been nicer to her she wouldn't have thought of Harry, but it was all too plain that Wesley was bribing her to keep quiet. He wasn't in love with her as Harry was, and a girl needed love, she told herself. Her mind was in an agony of indecision. Even now she was still in two minds as to what to do, although she knew the chance of getting Harry on the telephone was remote. She had left it too late.

A soft tap sounded on the door, making her start. Wesley came in. He was in evening dress, and in spite of the black-lensed glasses Julie thought he looked very handsome.

He closed the door gently, set his back against it and smiled at her.

"Scared, Julie?" he asked. "Heart going like a trip-hammer?" She nodded miserably.

"It'll soon be over," he assured her. "I wish I could see you through it, but it's the one thing you'll have to do on your own. But it'll be worth it, Julie. Once you're free of these people you can begin your new life and I'll do my best to make it a happy one."

"I—I keep thinking of Harry," she blurted out. "I saw him yesterday. He wanted me to go to America with him. He—he told me he loved me, and I could see he did."

Wesley's face was expressionless.

"I see," he said slowly. "And you're feeling pretty bad because the police are going to get him, aren't you?" He thrust his hands into his trousers pockets. Although he appeared calm enough, Julie had a feeling that he was inwardly as nervy as herself. "But a fellow like Gleb would never give you any happiness; sooner or later he would get into trouble and then you'd be in trouble, too. You have no alternative really, have you? You must think of yourself."

"I know," Julie said. "But it seems such a rotten trick to play on someone who loves you. I wish I could warn him to keep away. If it weren't for Theo . . ."

Wesley didn't say anything for a moment. He studied her as she

wandered miserably to the window.

"I have something here for you. See if this'll cheer you up." She turned quickly. He was holding out a cheque-book.

"It's for you. I've opened an account for you. You have two hundred and fifty pounds to spend. Every quarter I'll pay in a similar amount. You can go along to the bank tomorrow and give them your signature. Then you can begin to draw the money."

She had always wanted a bank account and for the moment Harry was forgotten.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds?" she said, staring at him. She took the cheque-book and flicked through the pages. "For me?"

"I said I'd make you an allowance of a thousand a year," he reminded her. "This is the beginning of it."

"I see." She stared at him, then she said, "You don't really care for me, do you? This is because you want to be sure I won't talk. You're not fooling me, you know."

"I didn't suppose I was fooling you, as you put it," he returned quietly. "Your silence is important, Julie. If you want to keep the things I've given you, you must keep my secret. No matter what happens you must say nothing. If you do, the flat and your income won't be yours any more. And it won't be because I'll take them away. It'll be because I should no longer be in the position to give them to you. You see, Julie, if it got out I could see I'd be ruined. I can't tell you any more than that. I shouldn't perhaps have told you so much. It was chance you found out, and I am going to do everything I can to persuade you from telling anyone. So if you want your flat and this money, if you want clothes and a good time, say nothing."

"I won't," Julie said steadily, and gripped the cheque-book tightly.

"And as far as Harry Gleb is concerned," he went on quietly, "if you show any weakness now you'll regret it later. But I must go now. Don't be frightened, Julie, and good luck. You will go through with it, won't you?"

She had to go through with it, she told herself, and remembered what Harry had once said : "I don't care how I get hold of money so long as I get it. Money is power. I have only a few years on this earth—then the worms, the dark and the cold. I'm going to enjoy myself while I can." That was her philosophy, too. Money was power. She couldn't afford to be squeamish, and she told herself Harry wouldn't have hesitated to do as she was doing if he had been in her place.

"Yes, I'm going through with it," she said.

But the moment Wesley had gone and she heard the front door slam she once more became a prey to her fears. There were another forty minutes yet before Harry arrived and she sat in her room, her fists clenched, sick with apprehension, and her eyes on the clock. As its

hands moved slowly towards the hour she became more and more jumpy. Every sound, the creaking of the doors, the ticking of the clock, the soft sound of the passing traffic, and the whine of the lift as it raced between floors, made her nerves tighten.

But she wasn't the only one to be strung up. In the Park, under the dark shadow of the trees, Harry Gleb and Theo were watching the lighted entrance of Park Way.

Harry held a cigarette in his fingers, the glowing end shielded in the palm of his hand. He was also uneasy and nervous, and every now and then he shifted his position restlessly.

Not so Theo. He leaned against a tree, his hands in his pockets, his hat at the back of his head, callously calm. He wasn't going to get excited over a job like this. It took a lot to upset Theo.

"What's the time?" Harry asked suddenly. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his sweating hands.

"Twenty past seven," Theo returned after consulting the luminous face of his wrist-watch. He glanced at Harry, hate in his eyes.

"Time they left," Harry said, dropped the cigarette on the grass and stepped on it. "Think we've missed them?"

Theo scratched his ribs, swore softly under his breath.

"Not a chance. What's your hurry? We can't do anything until eight."

"I don't understand why Ma's dragged Dana into this," Harry muttered. "We two could have handled it."

Theo grinned evilly in the darkness.

"She's right," he returned. "Anyone might spot the car if it remained for long in the alley. It's better this way. I can get round to the back without anyone seeing me, get the furs together, then when Dana arrives all I have to do is throw the furs in and she'll be away. It's a smart idea."

Harry grunted. He distrusted any sudden change of plan. "There they go," Theo said suddenly and pointed.

They watched Blanche and Wesley get into the waiting taxi. Neither of them said anything but their eyes followed the red tail light until it disappeared.

Harry lit another cigarette.

"Well, that starts it," he said. "I'd like to get in there now. This waiting gives me a pain in the guts."

"What's the matter with you?" Theo sneered. "Got cold feet?"

"Shut up, you ape," Harry snarled.

There was a long silence between them, then Theo again consulted his watch.

"About time I got going," he said. "Give me five minutes and then come on. See you in prison," and he slouched away into the darkness.

Harry's face tightened. "The little rat has nerves like steel," he thought. "See you in prison ! The kind of crack he would come out with on a job like this." Harry crossed his fingers and stood waiting. While he waited he thought of Julie. He was determined to make her leave the flat with him after he had passed the furs to Theo. He didn't care how much she protested. She was going with him.

Deciding that Theo had had time to reach the alley at the back of the building, he turned up his coat collar and walked slowly across the grass out of the Park towards Park Way. His heart was pounding and his throat was dry. He had never before felt like this on a job, and it worried him.

It would have worried him still more if he had known that Detective Inspector Dawson and two plain-clothes men were watching him and moved silently after him as he left the Park.

He entered the vast lobby of Park Way and went up to the porter's office.

"I'm looking for Mrs. Gregory's apartment," he said. "Can you direct me, please?"

He remembered that Julie had told him the top flat was occupied by a Mrs. Gregory. Such information was always useful, and Harry had filed it away in his retentive memory for future use.

"Mrs. Gregory?" the porter repeated, coming out of his office. "Yes, sir. Top floor. Take the lift on your right. I don't know if Mrs. Gregory is in. Would you care for me to find out?"

Harry blew his nose loudly. He had been holding his handkerchief to his face in the hope that the porter wouldn't get a good look at him.

"She's expecting me," he said. "It's all right. Top floor? Thanks." He walked quickly to the lift and pressed the automatic button.

While he waited he had a creepy sensation that he was being watched, but he didn't look round. Sweat began to trickle down the back of his neck and he mopped himself with the handkerchief.

The lift doors opened and he stepped inside. As he pressed the button indicating the top floor he took a quick look round the lobby. It was deserted. The porter had returned to his office. He drew in a quick breath of relief and leaned against the side of the lift as it shot him to the top floor.

Leaving the lift, he ran down the two flights of stairs that brought him to the landing leading to Wesley's flat. He looked up and down the deserted passage, then walked to the front door and rang the bell.

There was a long, unnerving pause before Julie opened the door. She stared at him, white faced, her eyes wide with fear.

"All right, Julie," he said, trying to sound brisk. "Let's go." He pushed past her into the flat and shut the door. "Come on, kid. Let's make it snappy."

But she could only stare at him. He was wearing a dark overcoat and a slouch hat pulled low over his eyes. A black silk scarf hid his chin. She could see sweat trickling down the side of his face from under his hat and his eyes burned feverishly.

"Harry!" she exclaimed, backing away. "Please don't go through with this!"

He caught hold of her arm and hustled her, protesting weakly, down the passage to Blanche's bedroom.

"Now, take it easy," he said, far from easy himself. "This has got to be quick. In and out, see? Get the safe open, kid, as fast as you can."

She was sick with fright, expecting any moment for the police to appear. She couldn't move, but stared at him with eyes like holes in a sheet.

"Harry! Why did you come! I told you to stay away!" she cried, wringing her hands.

He caught hold of her.

"Come on; for God's sake stop talking and get this damned safe open," he said feverishly, and shook her.

"But Harry . . ." she wailed.

"We'll talk when we get outside." He was controlling himself with difficulty. "Come on, get it open." He shoved her before the quilted wall. "Turn off the alarms. There's one behind the bed, isn't there? Turn it off."

It suddenly occurred to her that if he didn't take the furs the police couldn't do anything to him. She could swear that he had come to see her and then they would have no case against him.

"Harry! Listen, you mustn't take anything. Please go. I'll even come with you if you'll go now."

He rounded on her. His own nerves were at breaking point. He had never before wasted so much time on a job.

"Turn the blasted alarm off!" he shouted at her. "And stop talking!"

"But Harry, you don't understand . . ." she began, but cursing under his breath he caught hold of her arm and gave her a stinging slap across her face.

"Pull yourself together, you little fool!" he exclaimed furiously. "Open that safe!"

She stepped back, her hand going to her face. She realized at once that he had struck her because he was frightened, but in spite of that she couldn't forgive him. If he could do that to her after he had told her he loved her, what was his love worth, she thought.

"All right," she said bleakly. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Harry was now so jittery he nearly struck her again. He had been in the flat for over ten minutes and the safe wasn't opened yet.

"Get on with it," he said frantically. "We've got to get out of here."

She went to the head of the bed, moving like an automaton, and turned off the alarm. Then she went into the bathroom and turned off the second alarm. As she came out of the bathroom he again implored her to hurry.

Without quite knowing what she was doing she opened the safe. Harry gaped at the row of fur coats when the steel doors slid back. As soon as she had turned off the light that operated the photo-electric cell, he jumped forward, scooped up an armful of the furs and rushed from the room. She heard him push up the panel covering the service lift in the kitchen. Suddenly she felt she was going to faint and clutched hold of a chair to steady herself.

Harry came in, grabbed another armful of furs and rushed out again. He worked like lightning, not paying her any attention. There was nothing she could do now, she thought, gripping the back of the chair. In a moment or so the police would burst in and that would be the end of Harry.

Then something happened that rooted her to the floor and sent blood from her heart.

There was a sudden shrill scream that echoed through the flat, immediately followed by the crash of gunfire.

Julie found herself at the door, peering fearfully into the passage.

Harry was standing a yard or so from the front door, which stood open. He was staring down at something at his feet, something his body blocked from Julie's view. Nearby lay an automatic pistol; smoke drifted lazily from its muzzle.

"Harry !" Julie cried, and Harry, suddenly galvanized into life, slammed and bolted the front door. As he moved, Julie caught sight of a little doll-like figure lying on the floor. It was Blanche.

Julie screamed as she saw blood running down the side of Blanche's face, forming a crimson halo round her fair hair.

There came a tremendous crash on the front door, which bulged, creaked, but held.

Harry sprang back, turned and came rushing down the passage towards Julie. His eyes were bolting from his head; his colourless face dreadful to look at.

Julie shrank away from him.

"You shot her !" she gasped, throwing out her hands to keep him off. "Harry! keep away!"

"You know I didn't!" Harry gasped, grabbing hold of her. "I was in the kitchen. I've never carried a gun in my life. Julie! You've got to tell them. I—I didn't do it!"

Then the front door burst open and three police officers came charging down the passage.

Harry flung Julie out of his way, darted into the kitchen, but he

hadn't taken a step or two before he was pulled down, his frantic struggles smothered by many hands.

Julie heard him yell, "I didn't do it! I swear I didn't do it. It's not my gun!" and then everything went dark and she seemed to be falling into a bottomless pit.

VI

Theo was hauling himself up in the service lift when he heard the shot and he immediately jammed on the flimsy brake, stopping the lift. He was only a few feet below the service hatch that Harry had left open. The light from the kitchen reflected down the shaft, and by peering through the opening between the shaft and the lift, he could see part of the kitchen ceiling.

He heard Julie's wild scream and the crash as the front door of the flat was forced open, and he cursed, knowing that something had gone badly wrong.

The lift was operated by pulling on a rope from below. It was also possible, but not easy, to operate the lift by pulling on the rope that ran inside the lift. Theo had found it hard work hoisting himself up by hand, but he had kept at it, sweating and swearing, because he knew it was vital to silence Julia. And now this must happen just when he was within a few feet of his destination.

He suddenly heard the sounds of a violent struggle, then Harry's voice, strident with panic, yell: "I didn't do it! I swear I didn't do it! It's not my gun!"

Theo's face set.

"Someone's got shot," he thought. "This is where I get the hell out of here!"

Over-anxious to get away before anyone spotted him, he released the brake before getting a grip on the rope. Instantly the lift fell like a stone between the floors. Theo made a desperate grab at the brake and slammed it on, but the impetus of the lift was too much for it and it snapped.

Theo gave a howl of terror as the lift plunged down; a howl that was heard by the two plain-clothes detectives who were in the alley.

They saw the lift come down out of the darkness and smash to pieces against its steel bed. They saw a body hurtle out and thud on the damp concrete.

They ran forward, bent over Theo. One of them shone a torch on to his ghastly face. When he touched Theo, Theo screamed, startling both men. They drew back, staring at him.

"All right, son," the taller of the two said. "Just take it easy. We'll get an ambulance for you." He could see by the way Theo was lying that he had broken his back, and turning to his companion, he went on in a lower tone: "Nip up and get the inspector, George. He's had it."

Sweat ran down Theo's face.

"Where's he gone?" he gasped, seeing the other detective run off down the dark passage.

"Gone to get Dawson and the ambulance," he was told.

"Bet old Dawson will raise a cheer," Theo said, his face twisting with pain. "He never liked me." He panted for a moment, trying to get his breath. "Blasted back's broken. Don't touch me. It's all right so long as you don't touch me."

"You take it easy, kid," the detective said, and squatted on his heels beside Theo. "We'll fix you up."

Theo sneered.

"Going to get into the papers at last," he said. "I got a photo of myself in my wallet. Give it to the Press, chum. My old man'll get a kick seeing me in the papers. It'll be front-page stuff, won't it?"

"That's right," the detective said, grimacing.

"Get it now and keep it by you," Theo insisted. "They'll give you a couple of nicker for it. If you don't have it, Dawson will. You know what he's like."

To humour him, the detective took the wallet and found the photograph.

"This it?" he asked.

Theo peered forward.

"That's it. You give it to the Press." He lay for a minute not saying anything, then he went on: "What was that shooting just now?"

"I don't know," the detective returned. "Gleb wasn't carrying a gun, was he?"

Theo didn't say anything. If he was going to die, and he thought that was what was going to happen to him, he wasn't going to let Harry get away with it. Harry had hit him, and no one hit Theo without paying for it. But Theo wanted to know more about the shooting before he talked.

"I'm not saying anything until Dawson comes," he said. "He'd better hurry. I'm going to croak."

"Not you," the detective said cheerfully. "You'll live to do your ten years."

"They wouldn't give me ten," Theo said. "I'd be unlucky to get three."

Detective Inspector Dawson materialized out of the darkness and knelt by Theo's side.

"Hello," he said, staring down at the white, pain-lined face. "Got yourself into a proper mess this time, haven't you?" Theo opened his eyes.

"I'm all right so long as you don't move me," he said. "That ambulance coming?"

"Yes," Dawson returned. "Seen this gun before, Theo?" He dangled an automatic pistol before Theo's eyes, turned the beam of his torch on to it.

“Was that Harry shooting?” Theo asked. “Did he kill anyone?”

“We don’t know. It depends if this is his gun.”

Theo closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. “It’s his gun all right. Who did he shoot?”

“Are you sure?” Dawson demanded.

“Cos I’m sure,” Theo lied. “I didn’t want him to carry a gun. But he wouldn’t listen. He said he’d kill anyone who got in his way.”

Will you sign a statement?” Dawson asked quietly.

Theo nodded. There was a glazed look in his eyes now. “You’d better hurry,” he said. “I ain’t going to last long.” Dawson was already scribbling in his notebook. He got Theo to sign the statement after a little difficulty.

Theo was dead by the time the ambulance arrived.

VII

They were bringing Harry Gleb down in the lift as Dawson re-entered the lobby of Park Way. Harry was handcuffed to a burly plain-clothes man. Another detective walked just behind him.

Harry's face was livid. When he saw Dawson, the automatic pistol in his hand, he made a dive towards him, only to be roughly jerked back by his escort.

"I didn't do it, Dawson!" he cried in a cracked, despairing voice. "It's not my gun. I've never had a gun. You know me; I wouldn't do a thing like that. For God's sake, Dawson, don't pin this on me. I didn't do it!"

Dawson's hard blue eyes surveyed Harry up and down.

"Don't give me that stuff, Gleb," he said roughly. "Your little pal, Theo, gave you away. I've got a signed statement from him swearing the gun's yours. You've pulled one job too many, Harry. This is your last little effort."

"He's lying !" Harry shouted. "Bring him here ! I'll make the rat speak the truth! Bring him here !"

"He's dead," Dawson said brutally, then, turning to the escort, he went on, "Take him away."

"Dead?" Harry cried, then as the escort began to hustle him to the door he started to struggle like a madman, and it was all the two detectives could do to get him out of the lobby and into the waiting police car.

Newspaper reporters with a battery of cameras were waiting outside and the darkness was split open by the flash-bulbs exploding as they photographed his struggling exit. His wailing, protesting voice could be heard even as the car drove rapidly away.

Garson, Dawson's assistant, came up to Dawson.

"Mr. Wesley's arrived," he said in a low voice. "He's up there now."

Dawson nodded.

"What I want to know is how the devil she got through the cordon?" he said, rubbing his heavy jaw. "And why did she come back on her own like that?"

"I didn't question Mr. Wesley," Garson said. "He's a bit knocked over. I thought I'd give him a moment or so to recover. Will you question him, sir, or shall I?"

"I'll see him," Dawson said grimly. "There's going to be a hell of a row about this, Garson. We had the place surrounded and we knew what Gleb was up to and we calmly let him shoot her. She's a well-known figure, too. Just wait until the papers know what's happened. They're already asking how it is we were on the spot before the

robbery. What's happened to the girl, Holland?"

"She's still up there. The M.O.'s having a look at her." Dawson walked over to the lift. Garson followed him. Theo's dead," Dawson said. "Broke his back. The little horror had it coming to him. Jackson's looking after the remains."

They rode up in the lift.

"How did Wesley take it?" Dawson asked abruptly.

"Seemed knocked right out. He came in quietly. I didn't notice him at first. There was a lot going on. The body hadn't been moved and he practically stepped on it. Then he bent down and touched her just as I reached him. It gave him a pretty horrible jolt. I took him along to his study and left him I thought I'd let him get over it."

"Well, I don't think there was much love lost between those two," Dawson said. "He was planning to make Holland his mistress. From what I've heard Blanche Wesley was a bit of a bitch. But all the same it isn't funny to come home and fall over the dead body of your wife, is it?"

He stepped from the lift and walked in through the front door of Wesley's flat.

Blanche's body still lay where it had fallen. Police photographers were busy taking photographs and finger-print men were working in the hall.

Dawson didn't stop, but went immediately to Wesley's study.

Wesley was sitting in an arm-chair, his hands folded in his lap, his face white and set. He turned his head as Dawson came in. The black-lensed glasses emphasized his pallor.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Dawson. Bad business, sir. I can't say how sorry I am." Wesley nodded.

"Yes." His voice sounded flat. "Couldn't your men have stopped her coming in?"

"They had no instructions to stop anyone entering the building, only to prevent anyone leaving," Dawson reminded him. "None of my men saw Mrs. Wesley come in. If they had and had known who she was they would have stopped her. We had no idea she was in the flat. Why did she return?"

Wesley made a little gesture. It revealed a controlled despair.

"We quarrelled," he said. "To tell the truth, Inspector, we didn't get on well together. In many ways my wife was very difficult to live with. She had no patience with my blindness, and I suppose I'm not particularly easy myself." He hesitated, went on. "She drank a bit, and when she was like that she had a pretty violent temper. She had been drinking rather heavily before we started for the theatre. In the cab we got into one of those interminable arguments that always seem to

be cropping up between us. It developed into a heated quarrel, and as I was paying off the driver she left me. I had no idea she had gone until I had got into the theatre. It is very difficult, as you can imagine, for a blind man to be left suddenly high and dry in the middle of a crush of people, all moving to their seats. I left her ticket with the programme seller, thinking she might have gone to the bar or the ladies' room. But after the curtain had gone up, and she hadn't come to claim her seat, I guessed she didn't intend to see the show. I decided to go to my club. Then it occurred to me that she might have returned here and I became alarmed. I had some difficulty in getting a taxi. At last someone took pity on me and stopped one for me. When I arrived here I learned she—she——” He broke off and turned away.

“But how did she get in? No one saw her. Can you explain that?”

“I think so. I suppose she told the taxi driver to drop her at the garage entrance. The garage of this building is below ground and has a separate entrance. You can take the lift from the garage to our flat without entering the hall. She often does that.”

“But no taxis were allowed through after Gleb was in the flat.”

“Perhaps she walked. I don't know. I'm just making suggestions.”

Dawson stared at him.

“Oh, yes, I understand that. I didn't know about the garage. I'd better find out if anyone saw her in there. Well, we've got the man who did it. He won't get away with it.”

Wesley seemed to turn a shade paler.

“If there's nothing more, Inspector, perhaps you wouldn't mind leaving me? This has been a bit of a shock.”

“Of course,” Dawson returned, suddenly feeling sorry for him. “We'll try not to bother you. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“If you see Gerridge—he's my secretary—tell him to come to me,” Wesley said. “He should be in in a little while.”

“I'll do that,” Dawson said, turned to the door.

“Oh, Inspector, is Miss Holland all right?” Wesley asked guardedly.

“Yes . . . a bit shocked, but she's all right. I'm going to see her now.”

“Did she see anything?”

“That's what I'm going to find out.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Dawson went quietly from the room, closed the door. He stood for a moment or so thinking, then went into the lounge where Garson was waiting.

“Go down to the garage and find out if anyone saw Mrs. Wesley come in that way,” he said. “The garage is in the basement and was the one place we didn't guard. Wesley says he thinks that was how she got in.”

“Yes, sir,” Garson said, made to move off but Dawson stopped him.

"Where's the Holland girl?"

"In her room; end of the passage, sir."

Dawson nodded and went with a heavy tread down the passage. He rapped on the door, pushed it open and went in.

Julie was lying on the bed. Her tear-stained face blanched when she saw who it was.

"Where were you when the shooting took place?" Dawson demanded. He had no intention of wasting any time with Julie.

"In Mrs. Wesley's room."

"What happened?"

"I—I don't know. I—I didn't see any of it."

Dawson surveyed her; his mouth tightening.

"Now look here, young woman, you've been on the fringe of trouble for some time. Now you're mixed up in a murder case. You and Gleb were the only two in the flat. You'd better be a bit more helpful or you'll be getting into trouble."

"But I don't know," Julie cried, struggling up on the bed. "I didn't see anything."

"You heard something, didn't you?"

"I heard Mrs. Wesley scream. Then there was a shot. I ran out. Harry was bending over Mrs. Wesley. He'd just come from the kitchen."

"That's all you saw? You didn't see him shoot her?"

"But he didn't shoot her. He was in the kitchen!" Julie cried, wringing her hands. "He didn't do it. He hadn't a gun. Harry wouldn't do a thing like that."

"It's no use trying to get him out of his trouble. I know you've been in love with him, but it won't do," Dawson said harshly. "If he didn't do it, who did? Did you do it? Only you and Gleb were in the flat."

"Oh, no!" Julie exclaimed, terrified at once. "I—I didn't do it."

Dawson smiled grimly.

"I didn't think you did," he said. "But I wanted to show you lying might make things difficult for you."

"But—but I'm sure Harry didn't do it," Julie said, clenching her fists. "The front door was open. Someone could have shot her through the front door."

The invisible man? I had a man at either end of the passage. No one could have come up or down the stairs without being seen. As soon as the shot was fired both my men came into the passage. There was no one in sight."

Julie stared at him, going cold.

"Did Gleb have the gun in his hand?" Dawson asked.

"No. It was lying on the floor by Mrs. Wesley; just by the door."

"All right. Well, this let's you out. Theo's dead. Gleb's nabbed and

we're roping the Frenches in now. You'd better watch your step from now on." He turned to the door, looked over his shoulder. "You'll be a witness, remember," he reminded her. "This trial is going to cause a lot of noise. Be careful what you do between now and the trial, won't you?" He ran into Garson as he left Julie's room.

"No one in the garage, sir," Garson reported. "The staff leave at seven."

"You'd better try and trace the taxi that brought her here," Dawson said, frowning. "There's something very odd about the way she sneaked back here. I've got a feeling it'll pay us to put some work in on this angle."

Garson looked a little startled.

"But Gleb shot her, didn't he? There's no doubt about that, is there?"

"There's always a doubt until the trial's over," Dawson said acidly. "I'm not going to have my case shot from under me for the lack of a little hard work. I've wanted to lay my hands on Gleb for a long time. Now I've got him, I don't intend to let him slip through my fingers. Find out what Mrs. Wesley did from the time she left Wesley to the time she was shot."

"Yes, sir."

Neither of them noticed that the door of Wesley's study had opened an inch or so. When Garson hurried away, the door silently closed.

CHAPTER SIX

WHEN the police finally left there came over the flat a strange quiet. Julie had hoped that Dawson would have come in and seen her again. She longed for an assurance that Harry would be all right; that they didn't really believe he had killed Blanche, but Dawson didn't come. She heard his deep voice as he stood in the passage outside her door giving instructions to his men, and she had waited, her nails digging into the palms of her hands, hoping he would remember her. But it seemed either she had gone completely from his mind or else he didn't consider her to be of any further use to him, for she heard him say good night to Wesley and go off, his heavy tread resounding through the flat.

Then later she heard Gerridge leave. Even he had apparently forgotten her, and when the final policeman had gone she went quickly to the door and peered into the passage. She looked fearfully for bloodstains but someone had scrubbed the carpet clean. There was still a big damp patch on it, and on the white part of the pattern she could make out a faint brown stain.

Silence hung in the passage like the silence in an empty church. The two passage lights, shaded by green parchment shades, threw an eerie light on the pattern of the carpet.

She was frightened of the passage, feeling that Blanche was still in the flat, that she might suddenly materialize before her, and with a little shudder she closed the door and leaned against it.

She couldn't bear the thought of spending another hour in the flat. Her one thought now was to get away from it as quickly as she could. She had the key to the flat in Vigo Street and she decided to go there. There was no point in staying in this ghastly atmosphere a moment longer, and she immediately set about packing a bag.

Later, she was staring at the contents of the bag, wondering if she had forgotten anything. when a slight sound in the passage made her stiffen and she felt a cold tingle run up her spine.

Blanche?

She told herself not to be ridiculous. Blanche was dead. Then Wesley? Was he coming to her?

She waited and listened, and the sound, no louder than the scratching of mice at the wainscoting, was repeated. She crept to the door and opened it by degrees until it was just wide enough for her to peer into the passage.

Wesley was standing by the front door, looking down at the damp patch of carpet. He stood there for several minutes, his pale face

expressionless, and then suddenly he passed his foot gently over the patch of damp. He did this several times, and said softly: "She wasn't fit to go on living."

Julie felt suddenly tired and ill, and walked unsteadily to her bed and sat down. She put her head between her hands and closed her eyes. She remained like that for some time, waiting for the feeling of faintness to pass.

She did not hear Wesley come into the room, and when he spoke she started, her body recoiling in a convulsive little leap that seemed to startle him almost as much as he had startled her.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said gently. "I should have knocked. I wasn't thinking."

She didn't say anything.

"It's very quiet now, isn't it?" he went on, moving softly about the room, not looking at her. "I didn't come to see you before, because of the police. They told me you were all right. It must have been a horrible shock for you."

Still she could think of nothing to say.

"Dawson was odd. Didn't you think so?" He paused for a moment to look at her, but almost immediately began again his soft pacing to-and-fro. "He seemed suspicious. Why does it matter how Blanche got into the flat? Why does he try to make a mystery of it?"

"I don't know."

"There's no doubt Gleb shot her. I don't understand what Dawson is trying to establish."

"He didn't do it!" Julie exclaimed, starting up. "I know he didn't!"

Wesley turned quickly. Into his eyes came an alert watchfulness that Julie was too strung-up to notice.

"What are you talking about?"

"Harry didn't do it. I know he didn't."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Oh, I know he was bad, but he wouldn't hurt anyone. He didn't carry a gun. Mrs. French once asked him if he had a gun. He said he never carried one and never would. He was speaking the truth then, and he was speaking the truth to-night when he said he didn't shoot her."

"Have you told the police this?" There was the faintest tremor in Wesley's voice.

"Dawson doesn't believe me. He said only Harry and I were in the flat. If he didn't shoot her, then I must have."

"The fool!" Wesley was suddenly angry. "He didn't mean it?"

"No, he was trying to frighten me. But he didn't. I told him the front door was open ——"

"What ! What do you mean?"

"The front door was open. When Mrs. Wesley came in she forgot to close it."

Wesley suddenly caught hold of Julie's wrist, pulled her to him and stared at her fixedly. "What's the door to do with it? What are you hinting at?"

There was something in the glittering eyes that chilled her. "Answer me!"

"I only suggested someone in the passage could have shot her," Julie said, trying to free her wrist. "Please let go. You're hurting me."

He continued to stare at her for a long moment, then released her and turned away.

"I'm sorry. And what did Dawson say to that?"

"He said something about the invisible man," Julie sat down. Her legs felt shaky. "He said the police were watching the passage and no one could have come up or down."

"The invisible man! Fancy Dawson saying that." There was a feverish look in Wesley's eyes, but he was smiling, suddenly at ease. "And you meant to be helpful, Julie. But you do see no one could have shot her through the doorway? If the police were there—well, is it likely that anyone could have done that?"

"No," she said, wondering at the change in him "I suppose not, but I'm sure Harry didn't do it."

"I find your faith in Gleb a little touching. After all, he's a thief. He had no mercy on you. You have no proof at all that he didn't shoot Blanche. You don't love him anymore, do you?"

"No, I don't love him, but that doesn't make any difference. I just feel in my bones he didn't do it."

"It isn't a very convincing argument. I doubt if a jury would be impressed. Well, we'll see."

"Will they hang him?" Julie asked, wide-eyed.

"I don't know. It's better not to think about it. They haven't tried him yet." Wesley fumbled in his pocket for his cigarette-case, lit up, and again began to move about the room. "I don't think I could stand a night here, could you, Julie?"

"No."

"Shall we go to the new flat?"

She flinched from the idea of being with him, of beginning their association so soon after what had happened.

"Could I go there alone?" she said. "I—I'd rather be alone for a little while."

"That's absurd." There was an edge to his voice. "Neither of us should be alone to-night. We must keep each other company. There's nothing to worry about. I shall not bother you if that's what you are thinking. But if you want the use of the flat, Julie, then you must

share it with me. Perhaps you have changed your mind? I can't say that I blame you if you have. Perhaps you don't want a bank account or a mink coat or the flat? You have only to say so and you are free to do what you like. And by that I mean you can go from here and forget you ever met me."

Julie stared at him, and her face hardened.

"You seem to forget you're giving me all this because you don't want me to talk," she said sharply. "I'm going to do what I like. I don't want you at the flat."

Wesley smiled.

"Things have changed now, Julie," he said gently. "It doesn't matter if anyone knows I can see. I'm not going into explanations, but my pretended blindness was to do with Blanche. Now she is dead it doesn't matter. Perhaps one of these days I'll tell you about it, but not now. I shall continue to pretend I'm blind for a few more weeks, then I shall regain my sight, but it is not important. If you want to be difficult you can talk, but if you do, you won't get anything further from me. If you behave yourself I will continue to give you money and let you keep the flat; but only if you behave yourself."

Julie didn't know if he were bluffing or not. She thought not, but she wasn't sure, and this indecision infuriated her. She wasn't going to give up the flat or her money. She would hold on to that on any terms.

"All right," she said sullenly. "Then you'd better come, I suppose."

"Good." There was a new note in his voice. He looked brighter and less haggard. "Let's get out of here. Let's start a new life together. I'll promise you a good time." He moved to the door. "I'll put some things in a bag and I'll join you in a moment or so. Don't be long, will you?"

She finished her packing and when Wesley returned she couldn't bring herself to look at him. He took her bag.

"Let's go," he said. "I'll get Gerridge to finish the packing tomorrow."

They went down the passage together. Both of them flinched when they had to pass over the brown stain on the carpet. The lift was opposite the front door and Wesley crossed to it and pressed the automatic button.

Neither of them spoke until the lift came to rest and the doors swung open, then Wesley said : "It'll be good to get away from the place. I've always hated it."

As the lift began its descent Julie happened to glance down. In the corner of the lift was something that attracted her attention. Wesley saw it at the same instant. He made a quick dart forward, picked it up, and put it hurriedly into his pocket. But Julie had recognized it. It was the fingerstall she had put on his finger after he had cut himself on the night of their first meeting.

She was startled that he had concealed it so hurriedly, and saw an odd expression of acute tension on his face as if he were trying to control his feelings and only by the greatest effort had succeeded. She felt sure that behind the black-lensed glasses which he was now wearing his eyes were frightened.

At the time it seemed of no importance to her, just an odd, unexplained incident, but it made an impression on her mind and she was to remember it again later.

II

The West London Court was crowded when Harry Gleb made a five-minute appearance in the dock. Harry was stupefied when he saw the packed court. He had no idea that he was going to be the object of so many intent and curious eyes and he was badly shaken. After one horrified, shrinking glance, he kept his eyes fixed on the wall above the magistrate's head.

A great change had come over Harry since the night of his arrest. The charge of murder against him had knocked all the bombast out of him. He looked older; there was a wild, horrified expression in his eyes, as if he believed he was experiencing a terrifying nightmare and was making desperate efforts to wake up. His face was grey and lined and haggard. His mouth twitched and his hands trembled. If Julie could have seen him she would have been shocked. He was no longer the handsome, blustering swashbuckler she had known. He was a trapped, frightened animal with the smell of death in his nostrils.

Before being remanded for a week he heard Detective Inspector Dawson admit ruefully that Mrs. French and her daughter had slipped through his fingers and were so far still at liberty. He heard the news with mixed feelings; relief and envy. Had he glanced round the court he would have had Dawson's statement confirmed, for Dana was sitting only a few yards from him. It would have considerably cheered him to know that she had risked coming to the court to see him. He felt deserted, experiencing a frustrated rage to think that Theo had escaped all this by death.

Dana wasn't particularly worried about herself. She knew the risk wasn't great. The police had no detailed description of her; she was not known to them, and she had taken the precaution to wear a pair of shell spectacles and to tuck her auburn hair out of sight under a close-fitting little hat.

She thought Harry looked ghastly. He was obviously ill at ease and frightened and she scarcely recognized him. To see the way he gripped the dock rail until his knuckles turned white and to hear his quavering voice when he asked for legal aid sent a pang through her heart; for Dana had been in love with Harry for a long time.

The magistrate seemed to be in a hurry to get rid of Harry. When Dawson asked for a remand he agreed with alacrity.

Dawson said he hoped by the end of the week to have made further arrests. As Harry turned to leave the dock he caught sight of Dana who smiled cheerfully at him. He was staggered to see her there, and as the police urged him away he gave her a frightened, haunted look that worried her.

“He’s in a bad way,” she thought, as she pushed through the crowd to the street. “But they can’t hang him. He didn’t do it. Theo must have done it. He had the gun. I’ve got to get Harry out of this mess somehow—but how?”

She wandered along the street deep in thought, but knowing at the back of her mind that there was nothing she could do for him. They had got him. Once they got their claws in you, you were finished.

While she was wrestling with her problem, Inspector Dawson arrived back at his office to find Garson waiting for him.

“Remanded for a week,” he said, in answer to Garson’s query. “We’ll have to catch ‘em by then.” He sat down at his desk. “Any news?”

“Not of Ma French and Dana. They’ve hidden up somewhere pretty snug. No sign of them.”

Dawson grunted.

“What about the taxi driver who took Mrs. Wesley from the theatre to her flat? Found him?”

“It doesn’t look as if she went by taxi. No driver’s come forward. And another thing, no driver’s come forward about taking Wesley home. That’s a bit odd, sir. A driver’s not likely to forget a blind man.”

“Wesley said he came back by taxi, didn’t he?”

“Yes, sir. I have his statement here.”

“Leave that for a moment. Find out anything about Mrs. Wesley’s movements?”

“Not a great deal, sir. The commissionaire at the theatre saw her get out of the taxi and enter the theatre while Wesley was paying the fare. She’s well known at the theatre, of course. She’s played there a number of times. She went to the bar. The commissionaire thought it was strange she should leave Wesley to find his way in. He showed Wesley to the entrance of the stalls and told him Mrs. Wesley was in the bar. He says Wesley didn’t appear to hear, but went down the gangway, where a programme seller took charge of him.”

“I don’t see why he shouldn’t have heard. He’s not deaf. Well, go on.”

“Mrs. Wesley went to the bar. The bartender said she seemed in a bad temper and scarcely spoke to her. The woman was disappointed as she looked on Mrs. Wesley’s visits as a bit of an occasion. She said Mrs. Wesley drank three brandies and a minute or so before the first bell rang, left the bar. The commissionaire was surprised to see her leave the theatre. She headed towards Piccadilly Circus and no one seems to have seen her again until she arrived at the flat.”

“She could have taken the underground. Taxis aren’t easy to get these days.”

“I think that’s what happened, sir. If she caught a train at once she would have arrived about the time she did.”

"Let's get back to Wesley. How does his statement compare to the actual facts?"

"All right, sir, with two exceptions. One was the commissioner told him Mrs. Wesley was in the bar and he says he didn't know where she was. But then, of course, he might not have heard the man. But when he came out of the theatre after the curtain had gone up, the commissioner offered to get him a taxi, and he refused. That seems a bit odd to me, sir. I have his statement here. He says, "It occurred to me that she might have returned here and I became alarmed. I had some difficulty in stopping a taxi. At last someone took pity on me and stopped one for me."

"Yes, very odd. If the commissioner offered to get him a taxi and he was alarmed, why didn't he let the man get him one? Why go blundering about the street? He surely would know he couldn't hope to get a cab for himself. I think I'll have another word with him about that. He's not living at Park Way any longer. He's moved into a flat in Vigo Street. He's living with that Holland girl."

Garson showed his surprise.

"That's something that foxes me, Garson." Dawson pushed back his chair, thrust his knee against his desk. "What's the idea of a fellow like Wesley living with that Holland girl?"

Garson grinned.

"She's a pretty nice-looking girl, sir. A fellow doesn't worry too much about what's inside a girl's head these days so long as she's got a good body and a pretty face. At least, not the fellows who want that kind of fun."

"What's a pretty face to a blind man?"

Garson blinked.

"Yes, of course. I wasn't thinking. No, you're right, sir. I wonder what the idea is?"

"I've had a man keeping an eye on them. Wesley's throwing money away on her. They're going everywhere : night clubs, theatres, bottle parties, dances, restaurants, even riding in the Row. He's not going to the factory any more. For the past four days they've been everywhere together. I want to know what the idea is."

"Blackmail?"

"I don't think so. If it were blackmail why should she go around with him? A blackmailer likes to keep at a safe distance. And she doesn't strike me as the type."

"Perhaps they're in love, sir."

"Perhaps they are. I don't know. All right, Garson, you concentrate on the Frenches. I want 'em quickly. They're holed up somewhere. Keep after them. I'll have a word with Wesley. And keep after those taxi drivers. There's still a chance one or both'll come forward."

When Garson had gone, Dawson glanced at his watch. It was a few minutes after three o'clock. He'd call on Wesley about five, he told himself. If Wesley wasn't in, he might get a chance to talk to Julie Holland.

III

Benton lived alone in a small but comfortable West End flat on the top floor of an old-fashioned building that contained three bachelor flats and was serviced by a housekeeper and a valet. Breakfast was the only meal provided, and this was served in the small alcove leading off Benton's sitting-room.

At eight o'clock each morning (nine o'clock on Sundays), the meal was set on the table. Benton rose at seven-thirty, bathed and shaved, and then, in pyjamas and dressing gown, had breakfast. He left the flat at nine o'clock for the factory.

His breakfast consisted of cornflakes with watered milk, toast, a scraping of butter and strong coffee: it never varied. When he had finished the meal, he lit a cigarette and unfolded the newspaper that lay in a tight roll on the tray. No matter how important the news, he didn't look at the paper until he moved from the table and sat in an arm-chair.

On the morning following Blanche's death he had bathed, shaved and breakfasted with his usual pale calm. His mind was preoccupied with the two main interests in his life : Blanche and money.

He had met Blanche for the first time at her wedding, although he had seen her several times on the stage and had admired her from a distance. Wesley had given him no warning of his marriage. Wesley and he had been partners for a number of years. Together they had developed the Wesley-Benton Aircraft Factory from a small and experimental idea into four hundred acres of machine shops, runways and hangars. The drive admittedly had come from Wesley, but Benton's contribution had been none the less important. In his quiet, pale way, he had a brilliant flair for organization. He could turn chaos into orderly efficiency with a stroke or two of his pen. He could handle difficult contractors, placate irritable ministers, soothe nervous and suspicious hankers. He undertook all the petty, irritating jobs (vitally important in spite of their pettiness) where Wesley's temperament would have failed. The partnership had been successful, although each man disliked the other intensely, and where Wesley was concerned it had been profitable. Benton was never able to keep money for long. He was a spendthrift and his share of the profits was invariably lost in gambling and unsound undertakings which he could easily be persuaded to finance.

Some six years ago Wesley had wandered into Benton's office and had announced casually that he was getting married. Benton offered his congratulations and was curious to see the bride; curious and inclined to sneer. Who in the world would want to marry a cold fish

like Wesley, he wondered. Probably some horsey-looking woman whose only claim to fame was an occasional photograph in the *Tatler* or *Sketch*. Benton loathed that type of woman. But when Wesley introduced him to Blanche he had the shock of his life.

Benton was a profligate. His headmaster had once said before the whole school that he had a mind like a body full of sores.

That was when Benton had been involved in a particularly unpleasant scandal and had been publicly expelled. Women were as necessary to him as drugs to an addict. He had admired Blanche when he had seen her on the stage; at close quarters she bowled him over. He hadn't been in her company for long before he was obsessed by her. She had a sensual, animal magnetism that caught him by the throat. This was no passing infatuation; no idle lusting after a pretty woman. It went much deeper than that. It was like a virulent germ in his blood; a craving that tortured him; a suffocating feeling every time he heard her name; a pounding of blood in his ears at the sound of her voice.

When Wesley volunteered for the Royal Air Force, Benton, unfit for any of the Services, did not hesitate to take advantage of his absence. By then Blanche was drinking heavily and Benton willingly became her drinking partner. Drink had no effect on him, but it rotted Blanche mentally and physically.

Somewhat to Benton's surprise his obsession for Blanche showed no signs of waning. He had felt like this before with other women, but once he had become intimate with them the desire for their company wilted. But not so with Blanche. The more he saw her, the more intimate they were, the more he desired her : it was like throwing petrol on a smouldering bonfire. He would have married her if he had had the money. Blanche was willing and kept urging him to put his money affairs in order, refusing to use her own money so long as she could use Wesley's.

From a grimy, erotic beginning, their association developed into an odd but deep-rooted kind of love. Benton led a lonely life. He was not popular and had no friends. There was something about him that other men distrusted, and Blanche was his only companion.

When he unfolded the newspaper and saw Blanche's photograph staring at him from the printed page and read the banner headline that told of her murder, he went deathly pale. He sat motionless, the paper gripped in his long, rather beautiful fingers, his eyes closed.

He remained still for a long time. His mind paralysed by the sense of his loss. When eventually he did move it was to walk with slow, halting steps to the sideboard. He poured himself out a glass of brandy, drank it and refilled his glass. Then he returned to his chair and re-read the account of the murder. And while he read his face

went to pieces and he wept.

Later, he telephoned Wesley's flat, but there was no answer. He put through a call to the factory and learned that Wesley hadn't arrived. There was nothing else he could do, and he sat staring at the wall opposite, his teeth chewing on his pale underlip, his hands clenched in his lap.

He was still sitting in the same position an hour later when Wesley telephoned.

Wesley was curt; his voice without feeling. He asked Benton to look after the factory.

"I shan't be coming out for some time. You can get on without me. There's no urgent work. If you want me you can reach me through my club."

Benton was stupefied that Wesley should suddenly shirk his responsibilities. He dared not let him know how stricken he was at the news of Blanche's death. He imagined that Wesley had no idea of his relations with Blanche. Wesley could make things awkward for him if he liked. He was guaranteeing a big overdraft at Benton's bank. If he ever got wind of what Benton and Blanche's relations had been, Benton reasoned, he might easily withdraw the guarantee.

Benton had intended to make some excuse and take a few days off. The thought of going to the factory sickened him. He wished to remain in his flat and mourn for Blanche. He couldn't even bring himself to express sympathy for Wesley's loss. Neither of the men mentioned Blanche, and as soon as Wesley had made sure that Benton would look after the factory he rang off.

Benton had but a vague idea of how he got through the next two days. He took no interest in the affairs of the factory although he was at his desk at his usual time. He looked ghastly; white, drawn and dazed. Fortunately, he had capable assistants who realized he was suffering from a shock of some kind and relieved him of all work except where his signature was essential.

He attended the West London Court when Harry Gleb made his brief appearance and studied Harry with pale re-vengeful eyes. It gave him some satisfaction to see the fear and suffering on Harry's face.

The same evening he went to Segetti's Restaurant off Jermyn Street. He was known in the grillroom, as Blanche and he went there often when Wesley worked late at the factory. Benton had a sudden nostalgic desire to go there that night, to sit in his usual corner and to commune with Blanche in spirit. But as soon as he entered the crowded grillroom and saw Segetti bearing down on him he realized he had made a mistake. Without Blanche at his side he felt naked in this atmosphere of riches, good food and smart talk. With Blanche, the restaurant had seemed an exciting and friendly place, but now it made

him nervous, undermined his confidence. It was a sharp reminder that from now on he was going to be alone. He had no business in a luxury restaurant on his own. He became immediately an oddity : a fish out of water without some richly furred and smartly dressed woman at his side.

Already people were glancing curiously at him as he stood self-consciously in the doorway. Already he knew he had created a problem for Segetti. But it was too late to slink away, and he walked quickly down the red-carpeted aisle towards Segetti, who was coming to greet him.

"My usual table," he said, his pale eyes venomous. "I shall not stay long."

"Of course, Mr. Benton," Segetti said immediately, and as he led the way to a vacant table. he murmured : "Poor madam, we shall miss her sadly. A dreadful, monstrous thing."

Benton sat down.

"She liked coming here," he said, and looked up into the black Italian eyes. "No other place gave her more pleasure."

Tie would have liked to have taken Segetti into his confidence; to have told him how lonely he was and that the grillroom was full of memories for him. But there was a fatal quality in Benton that made people dislike him. He saw now dislike in Segetti's eyes, and a faint tinge of red rose out of his collar and flooded his face.

"To hell with him!" he thought, furious with himself. "I don't want his pity."

He ordered smoked salmon, which he didn't eat, and a bottle of Blanche's favourite brandy. He sat at the table brooding, unaware now of the curious glances that were shot at him. The brandy in the bottle sank rapidly. He knew he was getting a little drunk, but he didn't care. The brandy released the bitter, hard core in him that stifled him.

Then suddenly he saw Wesley and Julie come in. He recognized Wesley immediately by the black-lensed glasses and the queer, half-hesitant walk. Julie he didn't recognize. He saw only a good-looking girl in a flame-coloured evening gown, her glossy dark hair dressed to her shoulders. Round her white throat was a string of glittering diamonds. For a moment or so he paid her no attention. He stared at Wesley, scarcely believing his eyes. How could he do such a thing? he asked himself. How could he come with a woman to a public restaurant not five days after his wife had been brutally murdered? Was this why he hadn't come to the factory? Had he suddenly gone off the rails and was living with this woman? Who was she?

He shifted his bloodshot eyes to stare at Julie. Where had he seen her before? Then suddenly he stiffened, leaned forward, his pale lips tightened. Julie! Blanche's maid! He passed a hot, dry hand across his

eyes, then stared again. There could be no doubt about it, although he scarcely knew her in the gown which he now thought he recognized. Blanche had had a gown like that. He remembered it well : the gown she had worn the night she had given herself to him for the first time : a gown that conjured up a complete picture of their association together. Surely it was not the same gown, he thought, sick with horror. And those diamonds! They were Blanche's! Wesley had decked this servant in Blanche's things! To Benton it was an unforgivable blasphemy against Blanche. He felt hot blood rush to his head. The lights of the restaurant seemed to grow dim and a suffocating band encircled his throat. He was on his feet now, a choking, murderous rage consuming him.

He became vaguely aware that someone was holding him by the arm and a soothing voice was asking if he were unwell. He threw off the restraining hand with an ugly oath and walked stiff-legged, his face white and twitching, his eyes burning, to Wesley's table.

A sudden hush fell on the restaurant. People turned in their chairs to look at him. They watched him pause at Wesley's table and point with a quivering finger at Julie.

"Tell that dirty little bitch to take off your wife's dress!" Benton said in a cracked, hysterical voice. "How dare you, you damned housemaid!"

His hand shot out and made a grab at the diamond necklace but Julie struck his hand away and screamed. Wesley jumped to his feet. A young Army officer, dining at the next table, sprang forward and hit Benton savagely across his mouth with the back of his hand, sending him reeling back.

"You drunken swine!" the officer cried excitedly.

Two waiters had come up swiftly. They caught hold of Benton's arms. Segetti, mentally wringing his hands, waved them to take Benton away. They began to drag him to the door.

"Leave me alone!" Benton shouted, struggling furiously. "Take your hands off me!" Then his voice broke and he began to sob: great rasping sobs that sent a chill through those who heard him. He went limply now, muttering and sobbing, supported by the two embarrassed waiters. The glass doors swung behind him.

IV

During the days that followed Blanche's death, Julie achieved an ambition that had tormented her from early childhood. At last she had as much money as she wanted, a flat in the West End and a mink coat. It was unbelievable. If it hadn't been for Wesley she would have been beside herself with joy. But Wesley worried her.

Julie considered all men were alike. They were different only in their approach. As far as she was concerned they wanted only one thing. She found Wesley attractive, and when he insisted on staying with her in the new flat she was prepared to accept him as a lover. But it came as a shock to her pride when Wesley made no attempt nor showed any desire to be intimate with her. He was friendly and kind but impersonal, and it worried her. With other men she had always known where she was and could anticipate each move, but with Wesley she was mystified and frustrated, and as the days passed she began to hate him, suspecting that he could not forget that she was his wife's maid and that was the reason why he was so cold to her.

To punish him she demanded expensive presents, but instead of being annoyed he seemed pleased and urged her to greater extravagance. He took her to Asprey's in New Bond Street and bought her a gold and enamelled toilet set. He bought her a gold cigarette-case and lighter. He took her to the Savoy for lunch, the Berkeley to dinner and to Ciro's to dance. They went riding in the Row. They went to cinemas and theatres. But all the time she was aware of this impersonal barrier between them, and raged against it.

Since the night of the murder she hadn't had a moment to think of Harry Gleb. Wesley saw to that. Her days and nights were fully occupied in reckless spending, visits to night clubs, theatres and cinemas. There was no radio in that flat and no newspapers were delivered. She had no means of learning of Harry's remand or that Mrs. French and Dana hadn't yet been caught. She was kept so busy that she didn't even suspect that to all intents and purposes she was a prisoner. No news of the outside world reached her. No one telephoned nor wrote to her. Wesley never left her for a moment.

She was quick to realize, however, that Wesley was willing to give her anything she wanted, and for some days now she had been hankering after Blanche's wardrobe.

She decided it was time to broach the subject.

Before doing so she took care to make herself look as lovely as she knew how. She was in pyjamas and a polka-spotted red and white silk dressing-gown that Wesley had given her the day before. She looked attractive and she knew it, but Wesley was unmoved. He sat in an

arm-chair before the fire and studied her without interest.

“What particular mischief are you up to now?”

She smiled and made to sit on his lap but he pushed her gently away.

“Go and stand by the fire where I can see you.”

He was exasperating, she thought, but it was no use letting him see how angry he made her.

“I want some clothes,” she began. A cigarette hung from her carefully painted lips and she had her hands in her pockets, drawing the thin silk tight across her small buttocks. She squinted a little as the smoke of the cigarette drifted past her nose and she surveyed Wesley with calculating shrewdness.

“But surely you have enough clothes for the present. Aren’t you ever contented, Julie? As soon as you have one thing you want something else.”

“I don’t like the clothes you’ve bought me. I’ve been thinking. There are all those clothes at the flat. They fit me. Why shouldn’t I make use of them?”

Wesley stared at her fixedly. She expected opposition and was braced for it.

“They are Blanche’s clothes.”

“She doesn’t need them now; I do.”

“I merely mentioned the fact to remind you that she has worn them. I thought perhaps you would feel squeamish to wear the clothes of a dead woman.”

She was genuinely astonished.

“But why? Of course, I wouldn’t wish to wear the dress she was murdered in—that’d be horrible, but the other clothes, why not? Why should they be wasted?”

“Has it occurred to you that I might dislike to see you in my wife’s clothes?”

“Why should you? She had hundreds of dresses. There must be dozens she wore when you were blind. Why should it matter to you if you don’t know them?”

He suddenly laughed.

“You have an answer for everything. What a little ghoul you are. All right, Julie, have them by all means. I want you to be happy.”

She was quick to seize that opportunity.

“Why?”

He stretched his legs towards the fire and smiled at her.

“Why not? Why shouldn’t I try to make someone happy?”

“And what do you get out of it?”

“I have a charming companion, and besides, it interests me to see you emerging from your chrysalis. Why do you look so suspicious?”

Don't you believe people help others without an ulterior motive?"

"Men don't help me without a motive. You said you wanted me to be your mistress. You have a funny idea of a mistress, haven't you?"

"I don't recollect saying anything of the kind. I have no intention of making you my mistress, as you so crudely put it. I offered you a home, security and a thousand a year. I made no conditions. It is you who are interpreting the terms, and wrongly. I want nothing from you except to know you are happy." He paused to light a cigarette, went on: "Suppose you run along and change? If you want those dresses we'd better go over to the flat and get them."

"You don't have to come. I can get them without bothering you."

"Don't deprive me of your company, Julie; and besides, the hall porter might think you were stealing them."

She felt colour rise in her cheeks.

"Aren't you going to the factory anymore?" she asked, to change the subject. "Should you spend so much time with me?"

"I can manage the factory quite well from here, Julie. Are you anxious that I shall run out of money? There's no need to be worried. I have very able assistants." He was obviously laughing at her. "Will you get changed now? I wouldn't like you to catch cold."

She slammed the door as she left the room. It was the only way in which she could express her feelings.

She didn't notice how pale he was as they rode up in the lift to the flat in Park Way. She was far too excited at the thought of possessing all those lovely clothes even to look at him. She had no misgivings about entering the flat again. Even the faint brown stain on the carpet meant nothing to her. Blanche might never have existed, and Harry was but a vague uneasy stirring of conscience far at the back of her mind.

While she was choosing the dresses Wesley paced up and down, his hands deep in his pockets, his chin on his chest. And when she selected one particular dress and held it up for inspection, he said suddenly with a rasp in his voice: "No! Not that one. Put it back!"

"But I like it," she said, and her mouth set obstinately. "It's just right for my colouring. Why shouldn't I have it?"

"Put it back!"

She saw the lines of pain on his face and the glitter in his eyes and recognized the danger signals. There were plenty of other dresses to choose from and with a little shrug she put the dress back.

"Aren't you nearly ready?" he demanded impatiently. "You'll never wear all those things."

"Oh yes, I will. You don't think I'm going to miss an opportunity like this? All my life I've longed to have masses of clothes: I've got them now."

At last she was ready to leave. She had packed two large suitcases with the clothes she had chosen, but even then she wasn't satisfied. The room, she knew, contained jewellery and furs. She was reluctant to leave without some of them.

"Couldn't I have some jewellery?" she asked, and smiled coaxingly. "Those dresses will look awfully bare without something to set them off."

He stared at her for a long uncomfortable moment.

"You're never contented, it seems, Julie. Well, all right. I suppose I'd better find you something."

He turned off the alarms to the safe and opened it, and began to look through the drawers in the steel cabinet. She joined him but he turned quickly, standing between her and the drawers.

"I said I would find you something. Will you please sit over there until I have decided what you shall have?"

"But why can't I choose for myself? I know what I want."

"If you don't sit down, you won't have anything."

She was angry, but again the glitter in his eyes subdued her, and with a sulky shrug she walked to the window. But she needn't have worried : his selection took her breath away, especially the diamond necklace he so carelessly dumped on the table.

"Oh! How beautiful! Can I really have them? Are you giving them to me?"

"I'm lending them to you. Everything you are using is lent, Julie."

She gave him a quick puzzled glance, but she was too excited to bother about terms and conditions. These jewels were for her to wear. She could worry about whether she was to keep them or not later. She wanted to try on the necklace immediately but he wouldn't let her. He seemed suddenly anxious to get away from the flat.

Even when she had the two suitcases full of clothes and the jewellery she still hankered after the furs.

"Couldn't I have one of the fur coats?" she asked as she put the jewellery in her handbag. "I'd love the Arctic fox. *Shall* we take it with us?"

He closed the safe.

"No! Be content with the mink coat I gave you, and do stop asking for things. You are not having any of the furs. Aren't you ever satisfied?" He picked up the suitcases and made for the door. "It's no use looking sulky. Come on, Julie, don't behave like a child."

She followed him into the lift, inwardly fuming. She wanted the Arctic fox now more than anything in the world, but she knew it wasn't wise at this moment to press for it. Later, she would plan a campaign to get it. She was confident that if she kept on and on at him he would let her have it.

That evening they had gone to Segetti's restaurant because Julie had wished to show off her diamond necklace in the smartest restaurant in London.

Benton had spoilt their evening, and now, in the taxi going home, she sat frozen with rage.

Wesley had remained calm and quiet during the scene and after. She hated him for being so unmoved, feeling he had slighted her by not being angry with Benton. Brooding about this she could no longer keep silent and burst out : "How dare he call me names like that! The beast! You're not going to let him get away with this, are you? He was your wife's lover. You're not going to let him insult me as well?"

Without looking at her he said in a cold, contemptuous voice : "Hold your vulgar little tongue !"

She was so taken aback that she sank against the leather seat of the taxi and lapsed into outraged silence. Neither of them said anything until they were once more inside their flat.

Then Julie rounded on him, her face flushed and her eyes glittered with anger.

"I'm sick of this! I'm not staying with you a moment longer.

I don't know why I ever came here. You're always beastly to me."

Wesley wandered across the room and turned on the electric fire. He looked tired and drawn but there was a sparkle of anger in his eyes, too.

"If you want to go, then go. I won't stop you, but you'll take nothing with you. Do you understand? If you leave here you'll go in your own clothes and not the clothes I lent you. Go to your room. I'm tired of you to-night."

She went to her room, white with fury because she now realized that whatever he said or did to her could not be bad enough to make her give up this life of luxury she had discovered. She knew she was in a trap, and she raged against it. She hadn't the strength of character to give up her possessions and go back to the drudgery of the past. It infuriated her to know she hadn't the power over him as she had over other men. After a while she began to calm down, and she sat on the bed and for the first time began to reason out why he should have done so much for her when it was obvious she meant nothing to him. Why was he doing this when he was contemptuous of her; even disliked her? At first it had been because she knew he could see, but then he had made out that it didn't matter if she had talked. If it didn't matter, why was he still pretending to be blind? Suppose he had been bluffing? Suppose he still had a reason for someone to believe he was blind? But why? Who was he afraid of? Someone in the factory? Benton? The police? She jumped up suddenly. The police? Then it came to her in a flash and the shock staggered her. *He had shot*

Blanche! It was so obvious she couldn't understand why she hadn't realized it before. It was a perfect alibi. That was it! No one would suspect a blind man. He had hated Blanche. Gerridge had said if they were divorced he would have had to settle a large sum of money on her and he hadn't the means. Blanche was carrying on with Benton. The motive was there. He had pretended the operation on his eyes had been a failure when all the time it had been successful. He must have known sooner or later an opportunity would come, and he could murder Blanche in circumstances that couldn't possibly involve him so long as he kept up the pretence of being blind. And she had given him the opportunity. He had been quick to see how easy it would be to shift the blame on to Harry. That was why he had been so anxious that Blanche shouldn't know about the robbery.

Somehow he had persuaded Blanche to return with him to the flat. But how had he evaded the police? And then Julie remembered the fingerstall he had picked up in the lift and had tried to conceal. She remembered too how agitated he had become when she had told him someone could have shot Blanche from the passage. She was sure now he had come up with Blanche and remained out of sight in the lift while she opened the front door. Then he had shot her as she entered the hall and had thrown the gun in after her. It was simple enough. The police weren't in the passage. All he had to do was to close the lift doors immediately after getting rid of the gun and to wait until the police had broken into the flat. While they were arresting Harry, the lift would take him down to the basement. There, no doubt, he had waited a few minutes then walked in through the main entrance. Who would suspect him?

The discovery filled her with horror. She had known instinctively that Harry hadn't done it. She had known all the time. As she sat there, cold and shaken, not knowing what to do, she heard a step outside and then Wesley came in.

She jumped to her feet and backed away, fear in her eyes. "It was you!" she exclaimed. "You killed her! That's why you've pretended all this time to be blind!"

He closed the door quietly.

"I thought you would find that out in time," he said, calm and unmoved. "Well, now you know, we'd better talk it over. Sit down, and for goodness' sake don't look so scared. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I don't want to talk to you! Leave me alone! I'm going to the police!"

He pulled up an arm-chair near the bed and sat down.

"It's no use getting excited, Julie. It'll pay you to keep calm and hear what I have to say. Have a cigarette?" He held out his case, but

she shrank away, shuddering.

"Julie, will you try not to act like a servant in a melodrama?" The cold edge to his voice aroused her anger, as he intended it should do.

"How dare you! Get out ! Get out before I scream for help! Wesley lit a cigarette, dropped his case and lighter on the bed.

"Have a cigarette, Julie, and don't be silly. I want to talk to you."

"How can you be so unmoved after what you have done?" she said, staring at him blankly. "You haven't any feeling in you. You're cold-blooded and horrible."

"I assure you I have some feeling in me, Julie, but that's neither here nor there. You are quite right : I did shoot Blanche."

Julie stiffened.

"And you tried to make out Harry did it. You coward ! How could you?"

"I haven't the same interest in Harry Gleb as you. He happened to be on the spot and naturally it was assumed he did it. You can scarcely blame me for not coming forward, can you? I think you would have done exactly the same as I did."

She was so surprised by his callousness that she could think of nothing to say.

"After all, Julie, with all respects to your friend Gleb, he isn't of any great value to society, is he? He is a thief, a spiv and from what you tell me a danger to young women. He hasn't anything to commend him as far as I can see. On the other hand I am engaged on work of national importance. My research work on pilotless aircraft which is now coming to fruition will be of immense value to this and the next generation. Putting us both into the scales I feel I have many more claims to life than he has."

"How can you talk like that? He's innocent. You couldn't hide behind him. You couldn't let him hang in your place."

"But I didn't say I was going to let him hang in my place," Wesley returned, and smiled. "Before you get excited, Julie, I'd better explain what has been happening. Now don't interrupt. Just sit down and keep quiet. Please have a cigarette. It'll help to settle your nerves."

Hypnotized by his calm, Julie sat on the bed and took a cigarette.

"That's fine. All right, I'll begin at the beginning. I married Blanche six years ago. I was very much in love; stupidly in love, if you like. I should have known from her reputation what kind of a woman she was; I had enough warnings, but I didn't believe the tales. To me, Blanche was the most attractive and lovely creature out of a fairy tale. In those days I had a lot of money. It seemed only right that I should make her a large settlement. I made her a large settlement. And then she suggested I should also agree to pay two hundred thousand pounds if the marriage broke up. I won't waste time telling you how

clever she was about that. She made it sound like a joke. It seemed a joke to me until I had a watertight settlement presented to me for my signature. I refused to sign it, and Blanche promptly refused to go through with the marriage. There were two hundred guests expected, the whole wedding pageant had been arranged and I realized I would either have to sign or lose her and look a fool for the rest of my days. At least, that was how it seemed to me at the time. I behaved like a fool and I'm paying the price now. I was in love with her. I wanted her very badly. I felt the marriage couldn't go wrong. To cut a long story short I submitted to blackmail and signed. To tell it now makes it sound incredible, but I assure you she was very clever about it. She somehow made it seem that I was the one who didn't trust her, that I would be the one to break up the marriage if the marriage was to break up." He shrugged and smiled. "I assure you ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have done the same if they had as much money as I had then.

"The first year of our marriage was happy enough. A little disappointing, perhaps, but nothing that I could actually put my finger on. Blanche was always very bright and sweet; we went everywhere together, did things together, but all the time I didn't feel that she was quite mine. She wasn't, of course; she belonged to a dozen different men, but I only found that out later.

"The factory was developing and I was anxious not to raise capital from public money. I wanted full control as I had certain revolutionary ideas that might or might not succeed. I was gambling, and I preferred to gamble with my own money.

The factory expanded. Soon I had practically two-thirds of my money tied up in it. That didn't worry me, as I was sure the gamble would come off. It was then that Blanche began to make trouble. Thinking about it, it is obvious that Benton told her my capital was safely tied up. She didn't wish to give me up, but she did wish to live as she liked. Although I didn't have available capital I did have a good income, and Blanche didn't want to lose that if she could help it. And so she began to drink and have whoever she fancied for a lover and there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn't get rid of her. I couldn't afford it. I was busy at the factory, and after a while I didn't care what she did. By then I was blind and what I didn't see ceased to worry me. We lived like that for a couple of years. Then Benton began pressing her to marry him. It dawned on her that she could get rid of me; she could force me to sell out and give her the settlement. The terms of the settlement were watertight. In court I wouldn't have had a leg to stand on.

It came to my knowledge she was going to force the issue and I began to think of a way out. I had nearly completed my work. Another

six months would see it through. If she held off until then I could sell out in safety, but she wouldn't." He stubbed out his cigarette and immediately lit another. His hand was steady as he held the flame of the lighter to his cigarette. "Am I boring you, Julie? I'm telling you all this because I want you to know exactly why I had to get rid of Blanche. She was a drunkard by now and a danger. She didn't care whom she corrupted. Any young fellow who amused her was in danger. You have no idea what a beastly little animal she had degenerated into. I was at my wits' end. Then the chance for an operation came along. I had the operation, and while I was waiting for the bandages to be taken off it crossed my mind what an excellent alibi blindness would be if I decided to murder Blanche. It was just a passing thought, but the idea stuck and I thought about it more and more. I decided that if my sight was restored I would kill her.

"The eye surgeon had warned me that the chances of my recovering my sight was a thousand to one. When they took off the bandages I could see nothing. The operation was obviously a failure and was accepted as such. But later in the day I suddenly found that I was seeing a little light, and by the evening I could see fairly well. I said nothing. I pretended that I was still blind.

"When I returned to the flat I was surprised to find you there in Blanche's clothes and with Gleb. I guessed you and he were after the furs and I began to think of a way in which I could use you both to strengthen my alibi. I had every reason to get rid of Blanche. I had no mercy for her. In every conceivable way she was a menace to my activities. There was no alternative. She had to go.

"Well, you know the rest. The plan worked out better than I thought possible. The police are a little worried why Blanche should have returned to the flat, but I don't think that will come to anything. I was very careful. And now, Julie, I have at least three months before I need worry about Blanche's death. In those three months my work will be completed."

"You—you mean you'll tell them? You won't let Harry hang?"

"Of course not. When I've finished what I am working on I shall go to the police and give myself up. It will be at least three months before Gleb will be in any serious danger. I don't care a great deal what happens to me after my work is finished. I wouldn't let such a specimen as Gleb die for something I did.

So there's no need to look so tragic, Julie. He's having a bad time now, but he is quite safe. I promise you that. And I can't really bother about him having a bad time: he deserves nothing better."

Julie studied him. Her heart was thumping and her hands felt dry and hot.

"I don't trust you," she said finally. "I don't believe you'll give

yourself up. I'm going to tell the police now what you've told me. Why should Harry suffer for you?"

"I took the risk of telling you all this, knowing you might say exactly what you've just said. So let's talk about you for a moment. You realize if you do give me away you'll have nothing except what you can earn? I don't think that will be much. You have had a taste of luxury and you know what it means to spend recklessly. I can't imagine you wanting to give all that up in a hurry. But I may have misjudged you. If so, you are quite at liberty to go to the police, but if I deny what you tell them it may be difficult for them to find enough evidence to release Gleb and arrest me. They may, of course, but it's a gamble, and in the meantime, Julie, you will have talked yourself out of your flat and your clothes and your jewels, all of which seem to give you a great deal of pleasure. But if you'll wait patiently until I have finished my work, then, before I give myself up I'll make you a generous settlement and you can keep the flat and all these other things." He stood up, stretched and yawned. "I'm tired. Let's leave it for to-night. You think it over. If you want to throw away everything you have and go back to your drab little life I won't stop you. You must please yourself. But I assure you Harry will be safe enough." He smiled at her, went to the door. "Good night, Julie."

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER Wesley had left her, Julie had a pitched battle with her conscience. She hated Blanche and could feel no pity for her. The woman had been a horror and had got only what she deserved. Julie found it impossible to blame Wesley for what he had done, but to shift the crime on to Harry was unforgiveable. And yet, if she agreed to say nothing until Wesley was ready, she would be able to continue to live in her present style. It wasn't as if Harry would hang, she reasoned Wesley had promised to give himself up when the time came. The work he was doing was important, and she had no difficulty in persuading herself that his request for time was reasonable. Of course, it was rough luck on Harry. But why should she have to give up everything just to save Harry a little suffering? He had made her suffer in the past. Look at the way he had let Theo beat her up. She had suffered then, hadn't she? And besides, although she didn't want to be selfish, if she gave Wesley away now what chance would she have of getting the Arctic fox fur? If she waited Wesley might let her have it as a reward for all she had done for him. And if it didn't occur to him to give it to her she would ask him outright for it.

But suppose Wesley wasn't going to give himself up? Suppose this was a trick to gain time? It was pointless to think like that, she assured herself. All she had to do was to go to the police if he were difficult. It was just a matter of arranging something at the last moment so Wesley should have time to finish his work and she should be sure that Harry wouldn't pay the penalty. And so she argued with herself far into the night until her conscience, battered and bruised, gave up the struggle.

The following morning Wesley asked her what she was going to do. It irritated her that he was so calm and unmoved when she said she was prepared to give him time.

"Well, now that's settled," he said, with an indifferent shrug of his shoulders, "I must get back to the factory. I have a lot to do and time is short."

"He might at least have thanked me," Julie thought. "After all, not many people would have done what I'm doing for him."

"There is one thing," she said awkwardly. "I feel I should——" She broke off and began again. "Those furs. I'd like the Arctic fox. I don't see why I shouldn't have it. I'm doing a lot for you."

"And I've done nothing so far for you, is that it?" Wesley returned, smiling. "When I am in jail I shall be happy to think of you wearing the Arctic fox. But I'm certainly not giving it to you now. Let's be

quite frank with each other, Julie. My work and life are in your hands. I have no reason to trust you, and I'd feel a lot safer if I kept something you wanted very badly. It gives me a hold on you. You can see that, can't you? This I promise you : when I have finished my work you'll have not only the Arctic fox but the other furs as well. You won't have to wait long : two months at the outside."

She had to be content with that.

Now that Wesley had nothing to hide from her his attitude towards her underwent a change. He hurt and angered her by his plain speaking. He admitted he had set her up in the flat for no other reason than to ensure her silence. It was unfortunate he still had to live with her. The police would think it odd if he suddenly left her as he wished to do. At this stage he didn't wish the police to think anything he did was odd.

She was free to do what she liked. She had money, clothes and the use of the flat. She could invite her friends here, and he asked nothing of her except her silence.

"The harder I work the quicker your friend Gleb will be free, and the sooner you will have the furs, so don't expect me to take you out as often as you'd like. I simply shall not have the time."

This wasn't at all what Julie had expected, and when Wesley had gone off to the factory she became depressed and lonely. She had no friends. The people she once knew, the people who frequented the Bridge Café, were ruled out. She was afraid to make contact with them again. The morning dragged by and the afternoon spent at a cinema bored her. She was glad when she heard Wesley come in a few minutes after six.

"I hope you had an amusing day, Julie."

"I don't suppose you care," she replied bitterly. "But if you want to know I've had a rotten day."

He went into the sitting-room and she trailed after him.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I have a lot of work to do now, but if you like we can have supper together about nine. If you have something better to do I'll have a tray sent up."

"Oh, no, I'd like to go out to-night." She watched him sit down by the dictaphone. "What happened to Benton?" she went on. She had been thinking savagely of Benton all day.

Wesley adjusted the dictaphone, put on a new cylinder before replying.

"I've frozen him out." There was a curt, hard note in his voice. "It was simple enough. He owed money and I had only to withdraw certain guarantees for the bottom to fall out of his financial world. He won't bother me anymore."

"You're hard, aren't you?" Secretly she was delighted.

"I suppose I am. You have to be hard these days, Julie. You're not exactly soft yourself."

She saw he was impatient to begin work and she hated leaving him. She wanted company.

"I suppose I can't help you in your work?" she suggested, hoping he would let her stay with him.

He turned to look at her.

"Help me? You know, Julie, I've never met such an extraordinary young woman. Have you no fear of me? Aren't you horrified, knowing what I have done?"

Julie shrugged.

"Why should I care? She deserved all she got. She wasn't fit to live. Why should I be frightened of you?"

"I envy you your outlook. No, Julie, I don't think you can help me. You should be enjoying yourself. You mustn't waste time, you know. I really didn't expect to find you in at this hour. I thought you would be certain to be out having a good time."

"How can I have a good time alone? I've been bored stiff all day."

"Blanche was always complaining about being bored. You're beginning rather soon, aren't you? Why don't you look up your friends?"

"You know I haven't any friends now. It's all your fault. You're just jeering at me."

"Oh, nonsense." He showed his impatience. "But I've got to get on. We'll go into your troubles at supper. Please run along, Julie, and let me work."

"I'm sure I don't want to stay if I'm not wanted!" she exclaimed, her eyes filling with angry tears, and she went out, slamming the door.

Later she was abruptly jerked out of her slough of self-pity by the ringing of the front door bell. She was startled to find Detective Inspector Dawson waiting in the passage.

"Is Mr. Wesley in?"

She tried to hide her consternation, aware Dawson was studying her closely.

"Yes, but he's working."

"I'd like a word with him. Tell him I won't keep him long, will you please?"

Julie reluctantly let him into the little hall.

He looked round and whistled softly.

"How do you like it here?"

"It's all right," Julie said sullenly.

"That's a pretty dress you have on. He's looking after you well, isn't he? I wonder why?"

Julie gave him an angry look, but she was scared, wondering what

he wanted, and she burst in on Wesley flustered and shaken.

As soon as Wesley saw the frightened expression in her eyes, he said quietly : "Dawson?"

"Yes. He wants to speak to you."

"All right. Has he said anything?"

"Only you seem to be looking after me well and he wonders why."

Wesley smiled.

"He's no fool, is he? All right, Julie, show him in. There's nothing to be frightened about. But if he worries you, you'd better tell him the truth."

"You'd look silly if I did."

"But you won't, of course."

"You'd better not be too sure."

"Don't keep him waiting and try not to be melodramatic. It doesn't suit you."

"I'm beginning to hate you," Julie said furiously. "You're always sneering at me."

"Don't be childish."

She went out of the room, her face scarlet, and Dawson was quick to see how angry she was.

"He'll see you," she said, not looking at him. "He's in the end room."

Dawson seemed to be in no hurry.

"I saw your pal Harry Gleb yesterday. He's pretty ill. I told him how you and Wesley had hooked up. When a chap's in prison he likes to hear the latest gossip. But Harry didn't seem to appreciate that item of news. He seemed to think it was your fault he was caught." Dawson shook his head sadly. "Ever think of Harry? I don't expect you have much time for your old friends. You're having a lot of fun, aren't you? Well, Harry isn't. Harry's worried. Between you and me if I were in his shoes I'd be worried too. Off the record, that young fellow's going to hang."

Julie eyed him steadily, but said nothing.

"Perhaps you don't think so? Maybe you've got something up your sleeve that'll save him?"

"I haven't."

"Sure? Anyone withholding evidence in a murder case can get into a whale of a lot of trouble. You still think Harry didn't do it?"

"Did you want me, Inspector?" Wesley asked from the doorway."

Dawson sighed, turned.

Wesley, his eyes hidden by the dark glasses, was standing looking towards Dawson. There was a stillness about him that betrayed his tension.

"I did." Dawson moved slowly across the room. "I was just having a

word with Miss Holland. But now you're here——”

“Come into the sitting-room. You'll find it more comfortable. And Julie, you'd better change. When the Inspector has gone we have an appointment, if you remember.”

As soon as Dawson and Wesley had gone into the sitting-room Julie fled to her bedroom, thankful Wesley had given her the excuse not to see Dawson again.

Alone, she began to work herself into a panic. Would she get into trouble for not telling the police about Wesley? Was Dawson bluffing? There was such a thing as being accessory to murder, although she had only the vaguest idea what it meant. Could they send you to prison? Should she tell Dawson the truth? If she did perhaps he wouldn't take any action against her. But he might. He didn't like her. He might be glad of the chance to get her into trouble.

She thought of Harry. It was cruel and beastly of Dawson to have told him she was living with Wesley. And it wasn't true. Not in the way Harry would think they were living together. But why was she getting into such a state about Harry? She didn't love him, or did she? Thinking about him she knew she would rather have Harry with her than Wesley. What fun they would have had! She was always thinking about Harry now. Because she couldn't have him, she wanted him, and it wasn't long before she believed she was once again in love with him. She began to make plans. There was no reason why Harry and she shouldn't get together when Wesley had given himself up and the money was hers. With the money Wesley had promised to settle on her, she and Harry could go to America. She supposed they would send Harry to prison for breaking into Blanche's flat, but it couldn't be for long and she would wait for him. Suddenly all the old feeling for him was back. She realized now she had always loved him, and he loved her. He had said so. Hadn't he pleaded with her to join up with him again? And, like a fool, she had turned him down for Wesley.

Dawson's deep voice in the passage outside interrupted her thoughts. She heard him walk to the front door. A moment or so later Wesley came into her room. He stood just inside the door looking pale and tired.

“He's gone, but it was a near thing, Julie; a very near thing.” She started to her feet.

“Why? What did he want?”

“Asking questions. I wasn't quite as clever as I thought. But he's satisfied now.”

“What questions?”

“Checking my statement. I avoided the obvious trap, but if he hadn't been so sure I was blind I might have been in a mess.” He ran his fingers through his hair. Julie hadn't ever seen him look so

anxious. "I don't feel like doing any more work to-night. This has unsettled me. Let's go somewhere and enjoy ourselves."

But Julie was worrying about herself.

"Dawson said I could get into trouble if I held back any evidence. I want to know what he means. I'm not going to get into trouble for anyone."

"You do worry about yourself, don't you? They can't do anything to you unless you talk. There's nothing to be alarmed about."

"It's all very well for you, but suppose they find out?"

"How can they unless you tell them? For goodness' sake stop worrying about yourself. I have enough worries of my own without having to listen to your selfish little problems. Now get changed and we'll go out."

Julie flared up.

"You don't think of me for a moment ! I'm sick of being treated like a servant. You're always sneering and jeering at me'.

"You have only yourself to blame," he said quietly. "You don't have to stay here."

"And give up everything? I'm not that much of a fool!"

"I'm afraid you're ruled by greed, Julie. As soon as you have one thing, you want something else. You are never satisfied, and I'm afraid you never will be."

"Are you calling me greedy?" she said furiously. "How dare you! I'm not! I never have been, so there !"

Wesley laughed.

"You're quite hopeless, Julie. Don't be angry. Get changed and let's go out."

"I won't go out with you! I hate you! Get out and leave me alone ! I hate you! I hate you!"

She threw herself on her bed and began to cry.

II

There was no happiness for Julie now. Her life with Wesley became a continual conflict : a clash of wills in which she invariably came off second-best.

He was always busy, working late at the factory and when at home working far into the night. She was bored and miserable and haunted with thoughts of Harry. But she could not give up the flat or her possessions. She knew she would be happier if she went back to work, but she hadn't the strength of character to take the plunge.

She had everything that money could buy, except happiness, and her conscience gave her no peace. She began to brood about Blanche's death and the full horror of Wesley's crime slowly dawned on her. Although it was over a week since the murder, the fact that Wesley had killed Blanche only now meant anything to her, and once she began to think of him as a killer she became frightened of him. He had told her she held his life in her hands. If he could get rid of her no one would ever find out he had killed Blanche. She became nervous, and would wake in the night, terrified he was in the room, creeping on her to kill her. She locked herself in; she never turned her back on him; she was always watching to see he didn't have a chance to poison her.

She had an idea that she might sell the jewellery he had lent her and with the proceeds be independent of him, but she calculated that the money wouldn't last her for long and then she would be no better off. He had promised to settle money on her, and even though, as the days went by, she distrusted him more and more, she could not bring herself to lose the chance of being rich at last in her own right.

When Harry came up before the magistrates after the remand she was called as a witness for the prosecution. She was panic-stricken at the thought of publicly admitting she had been a police informer.

She received no sympathy from Wesley.

"You can't have your cake and eat it," he told her. "But please yourself what you say. If it makes you feel any better tell them I did it. I'm not going to influence you one way or the other," and he smiled at her, obviously amused by the furious, frustrated expression on her face.

She raged inwardly that he had so accurately judged her character. He had no misgivings that she would give him away. He was certain he was safe. Again and again, infuriated by his confidence, she was on the point of telephoning the police, but each time she changed her mind at the last moment.

When she stood in the witness-box, stared at by hundreds of eyes, she burned with shame. The sight of Harry sent a pang through her

heart. She scarcely recognized him. He had lost weight, his face was lined and drawn, and there was a trapped, terrified look in his eyes. And he wouldn't even look at her. That was the last straw. He stood in the dock, his flashy suit pathetically out of place in the drab, sordid surroundings, his hands clutching on to the dock rail, his head lowered.

The Counsel for the Prosecution led her quickly and kindly through her story. He made things easy for her, drawing for the Court a picture of a terrified, inexperienced young girl caught up in a web of circumstances over which she had no control. Julie thought he overdid it, and wished he would stop harping on her innocence. What could Harry be thinking of her? She glanced across the well of the court, but Harry still wouldn't look at her.

But when the Counsel for the Defence began to question her the friendly atmosphere underwent a swift change. He seemed determined to spoil the good impression the Court had of her and to discredit her as much as he could. He succeeded. He asked her point-blank whether it was a fact she had been intimate with Harry. She hedged, but he kept after her until, red-faced and confused, she admitted it. So much for her innocence! Was it not a fact, he went on, that she had taken the job as Blanche's maid willingly, knowing a robbery had been planned? She denied this so hotly she could see no one believed her. What was she doing now? And he stared down his beaky nose when she said she was looking after Mr. Wesley. As a maid? He wanted to know. As a housekeeper, she floundered.

She left the witness-box knowing she hadn't helped Harry nor herself. The Counsel for the Defence had made her out to be a female Judas. She couldn't bear to stay in court after that, and it was Wesley who told her later that Harry had been committed for trial at the next Old Bailey sessions.

The papers were full of the case, and she read and re-read the accounts, shrinking with shame when she read the veiled insinuations the reporters had made regarding her relations with Wesley. She realized, too, that Harry hadn't a chance. Although no one actually saw him shoot Blanche, when the police had burst in they had seen him trying to escape. Only Julie and he were in the flat. Julie, as a police informer, had no motive for killing Blanche, but Harry had. He was, as the Counsel for the Prosecution had said, a rat in a trap. The whole thing appeared to be a foregone conclusion.

It was then that Julie really began to worry. Harry's white, agonized face haunted her. She kept reassuring herself that he would be all right, that Wesley would give himself up, but when she realized what a hopeless trap Harry was in she began to fear that something might happen to Wesley. Suppose he was run over and killed? Then nothing

could save Harry. Tormented by this idea, she went to Wesley.

“Do you think I am utterly heartless?” he said, laying down a sheaf of papers he was studying. “I thought of that weeks ago and there’s a signed statement at my bank to be opened after my death. If anything happens to me, he won’t suffer.”

“How do I know you are speaking the truth?”

“You should try to assess character, Julie. I don’t think you believe I’ll save Gleb. Do you?”

“If you say so I suppose you will,” Julie said sulkily.

One night, a week before the trial, Wesley called her as soon as he entered the flat. She hadn’t seen him for two days and she came from her room cautiously.

“What is it?”

She stood just inside the doorway and looked suspiciously at him. He was pacing up and down, a frown on his face, his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets.

“I’ve seen Dawson, he tells me Dana French has come forward as a witness for the defence.”

“But she will be arrested !” Julie exclaimed; changing colour. “Apparently she is in love with Gleb.”

“What do you mean?” Julie demanded angrily.

“She’s sacrificing herself because she thinks she can save him.”

“But how?”

Wesley shrugged.

“She’s willing to swear the gun belonged to Theo and that it was Theo who shot Blanche. She doesn’t realize that her evidence won’t save Gleb. But I thought it might interest you. It seems there are still a few people left who are unselfish.”

Julie clenched her fists. She was sick with envy and rage. To think that painted creature should have done that for Harry!

“You hate me, don’t you?” she exclaimed, facing him.

“No, Julie, I don’t hate you. In fact, you interest me. Nothing would please me more than for you to go to the police and tell them the truth. It would prove to me that I was entirely wrong about you.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do. Even now, when this girl has set you an example, you won’t risk the chance of losing your money.”

“You’re just trying to be beastly. Harry won’t hang. You’ve promised me. Why should I give up everything for the sake of a few weeks? It’s you who are selfish and cruel. You aren’t going to let him hang?”

“No, but it’s hard for you to believe, isn’t it? I’m beginning to think you wouldn’t sacrifice anything for him even if I did let him hang.”

“I would ! You’d better not try any tricks. It’s only because I know I can save him that I’m doing this. Why shouldn’t I have happiness and

money? All my life I've had to do without."

"Happiness? Are you happy, Julie? I doubt it. And when you are on your own and have your money you still won't be happy. A girl like you can never be happy. You're chasing something that doesn't exist."

"I'll see about that. And while we're on the subject just how much money are you leaving me?"

"I was wondering when you were going to ask that. I thought two thousand a year would be enough."

She wouldn't get another chance, she thought, and said, "Two thousand? After all I've done for you? I want more. I want much more. Who else have you to leave your money to? If it hadn't been for me you wouldn't be able to finish your precious work. Isn't that worth more to you? I want five thousand."

"Don't be childish."

"I want it and I mean to have it!"

He looked at her, contempt in his eyes.

"Has it ever crossed your mind, Julie, that I could get rid of you very easily?"

Her anger went like the blowing out of a match flame.

"Frightened?" he went on. "When a man has committed one murder, a second one doesn't increase his punishment. What could be easier and more convenient for me than to wring your wretched little neck?"

She backed away.

"And sometimes, Julie, I feel it would give me such a lot of pleasure. Unfortunately, I don't seem to be a killer by nature. You may believe it, but I am sorry for what I did to Blanche. She meant nothing to me in the end; she deserved to die, but not at my hands. I shall regret her death as long as I live. The only thing that matters in life, Julie, is peace of mind. That I haven't got; nor have you. And don't look so scared. You're quite safe. I don't want your death on my conscience and, besides, I don't fancy touching you. The more I see of you, Julie, the more I realize what an unpleasant young woman you are."

"We'll see about that," Julie said furiously. "You'll be sorry for that. You see if you aren't."

Wesley laughed at her.

III

Benton sat in the bar of a shabby public house near Charing Cross station. He sipped whisky and stared at the small, wet rings that decorated the wooden top of the table beside which he was sitting. There was a bleak, unhappy expression in his eyes and his thin body was shivering.

He was finished, he told himself. The best way out would be to shoot himself. He had been telling himself this for the past two weeks, but he knew he hadn't the courage either to kill himself or to face his creditors. He was like a man on a high tight-rope who has lost his nerve and knows that if he makes a move he will fall. He had made up his mind to keep out of the way and do nothing until something happened that forced him into action. He had left his flat in Dover Street and for the last four or five days he had wandered the streets, sleeping at a different hotel each night. He had thirty-five pounds in his pocket and when that had gone there was nothing. He owed a lot of money. He wasn't sure how much he did owe, but he thought it might be something like twenty thousand pounds. It might be more and he didn't think it could be less. If they got hold of him they would make him bankrupt. The disgrace of bankruptcy hung over him like a soiled cloak. He would have to give up his club. Ever since his father had made him a member he had never lost the feeling of pride that he had when he entered the dignified portals and had used the big, silent rooms for the first time. He clung fiercely to tradition, knowing there was nothing else to cling to. His school, his club, his flat and the fact his father had been a general were the highlights in his life. "They meant more to him than anything else; they and, of course, Blanche. Now he had lost everything and his pale hatred centred on Wesley.

Benton was not a violent man. There was no primitive spark in him that could be flamed to murder. His hatred was spiteful and vindictive but not violent, and as he sat in this dirty little public house he perfected a plan of revenge. It didn't cross his mind to wreak a physical revenge on Wesley. A blind man would be easy to injure or even to murder, but it would only afford a momentary satisfaction. He wanted something more subtle than that. He wanted Wesley to suffer as he was suffering.

He flicked away a speck of dust on his black overcoat. The gesture was unconscious, but revealed he had at last made up his mind. He could now think of something else besides Wesley, and the speck of dust had caught his eyes as his mind was released from its problem. Although he had been living in ratty little hotels with only a change of clothing he still managed to maintain his finicky elegance, and each

morning he lowered his shivering body into a cold bath. His misfortunes had not undermined that traditional habit.

He finished his whisky and walked a little unsteadily across the bar to order another. A girl in a red hat and a dirty mackintosh caught his eye and smiled. She was tall, big-hipped and robust, and for a moment Benton's mind wavered and he felt a flicker of desire run through him. Then he noticed her grimy hands and a line of dirt round her neck and a faint sour smell that came from her hair as he stood close to her, and he inwardly shivered to think that such a creature could raise in him even for a moment a feeling of desire.

He returned to his table and sat down again, and drank half the whisky, setting the glass carefully on one of the wet rings. He took a cigarette from his case.

"I'll have one if you can spare it," the girl in the red hat said, coming over to him.

He rose to his feet. A gentleman, his father had told him, behaved like a gentleman even to a whore.

"I'm afraid you are wasting your time," he said in his pale voice. "Please excuse me."

"I'm in no hurry, *cheri*. I'll give you a good time. You can stay an hour if you like."

Again he felt a flicker of desire like pain run through him, and he thought of Blanche. He was alone now; he didn't have to keep faith with anyone except himself. He looked again at the girl, appraising her with his pale, lonely eyes and was again horrified with himself for even contemplating going with her.

"I'm afraid not," he said, still courteous. "You must excuse me."

"You look sort of fed up. I'd make you forget."

"I'm afraid not." His grimacing smile came and went. "Well, buy me a drink. You wouldn't begrudge me a drink, would you?"

He fingered his loose change in his pocket. He did begrudge her the drink. He needed every penny now, but he felt on him the jeering eyes of three men who were standing at the bar and he was afraid she would make a scene.

"I'm in a hurry. Here, buy one on me. I really must be going." She looked at the half-crown he held out to her and her full lips curled scornfully.

"You can stick that on the wall. If you didn't want me why did you make faces at me? Oh, hop it, you mean little rat."

He left the bar hurriedly, the jeering laughter of the men following him. It was only when he got into the fresh night air that he realized he was drunk and he had to walk carefully. As it was he lurched against an old woman who was walking towards Charing Cross station. She was very old and bent and shabby and she thudded

against the wall from the impact of his shoulder.

He stared at her in stupefied horror, raising his hat and muttering apologies. He had never knocked into a woman in his life. A gentleman, no matter how drunk, didn't fall against a woman. He was crimson with shame.

He saw her old eyes were full of weak rage as she said : "You're drunk, that's wot you are. Tight as a bloody lord."

He was fumbling in his pocket for the half-crown that had already been scorned when the old woman recovered her balance and shuffled on, leaving him to gaze after her, a pale spark of anger flaming up in him like the first twinge of tooth-ache. And as he walked to the Strand he muttered to himself, his head down, his shoulders hunched, a bitter, angry figure to interest the curious eyes of the people who passed him.

Wesley ! He wouldn't wait any longer. He couldn't go on like this. First he must settle with Wesley, then his mind could grapple with his own problems; but so long as Wesley occupied his thoughts he would never get himself in hand.

He quickened his pace. In the distance Big Ben struck nine o'clock. The Strand was still crowded. The crowds were coming out of the Tivoli and he could hear their shuffling feet and their cheerful voices behind him. He cut across Trafalgar Square and stopped suddenly by one of the fountains.

There were three watchmen at the factory, he was thinking. He knew their routine well. They had supper together at eleven o'clock. He had once caught them at it. It was against the rules, and although they had been warned he knew they continued to meet at eleven. For half an hour the research laboratory was unguarded. He still had the key. It shouldn't be difficult.

His shadow lay across the dark water of the fountain and he stared at it, his mind groping back into the past. He remembered for no reason at all the first time he met Blanche, and recaptured the feeling that had come over him as he looked into her wide, blue eyes. That was something that would never happen again; a precious moment, not valued then, but treasured now. He had nothing to look forward to, only memories to look back on; memories and revenge.

He set off quickly towards Pall Mall, passing his club with a furtive glance at the lighted windows. He would have liked to have gone in for a drink and a last look round, but his courage quailed at the thought of meeting the hall porter, an aged man who knew every member by name, knew what their businesses were and how much money they had. He did pause to look through the window of the smoking-room. The big arm-chairs standing in pairs about the room, the soft lighting, the vast Adam's ceiling, the two fireplaces in which

great logs cheerfully blazed, the sedate movements of the old waiter as he carried a tray of drinks to a group of members sitting hunched up in a circle round one of the fires formed a picture that he took away with him : a poisoned barb in his mind.

That room had been a part of his life a week or so ago. Wesley had taken it from him. There was a feverish look in his eyes as he ran into the road, waving his arms at a taxi that had just set down a fare and was pulling slowly away from the kerb.

At first the driver was unwilling to go out as far as Northholt, but when Benton thrust a pound note into his hand he grumblingly agreed.

Benton stared out of the window as the taxi rattled and banged along Bayswater Road. There was a light, airy feeling inside his head and his mouth was dry. He wanted another drink, and as the taxi passed Shepherd's Bush underground he leaned forward and told the driver to stop at the next public house.

He bought the driver a pint of beer while he swallowed greedily two double whiskies. The driver, a thick-set, elderly man, drank the beer grudgingly. Benton could see from his surly expression he had taken a dislike to him. But Benton was used to that. Neither of them said anything except the customary, "Good health," and neither of them meant it.

It was now a few minutes to ten o'clock. Plenty of time, Benton thought and he paid for the drinks and went back with the driver to the taxi.

As the taxi passed Wood Green underground station, Benton suddenly recollected coming this way to the Kensal Green crematorium for Blanche's funeral. He hadn't gone into the little chapel. Wesley had been the only mourner and he hadn't been able to bring himself to share his grief with Wesley. There had been a big crowd of morbid sightseers and he had mingled with them, nursing his grief as a man nurses a mortal pain. And when everyone had left he had gone to the grave and laid on it a bunch of violets. He had derived a little comfort and happiness to know that his were the only flowers on the wet, raised earth. He stopped the taxi a quarter of a mile from the factory and without looking at the driver walked rapidly into the darkness. The broad two-way road was still busy with home-going traffic and he kept to the grass verge, his head bent against the blinding headlights of the oncoming cars.

The gates of the factory were closed and locked, but he had expected that. He knew of a loose plank in the fence further along the road; a secret exit used by some of the workers who slipped out in working hours to buy fruit from the lorries drawn up near the airfield. He pushed the plank aside, stooped and passed his thin body through

the opening, then set off quickly towards the research laboratory.

The factory was in darkness. Even the control room and the hangars were shut down for the night. He walked on the grass, his pale eyes alert, his hands deep in his overcoat pockets.

The research laboratory, a one-storey building of brick and tile, was hidden behind the main office block, three or four hundred yards from the main entrance. Coming upon it suddenly, Benton was startled to see a solitary light in one of the windows. The moon, riding high, cast a cold, white light over the building, picking out the mortar between the bricks. Benton remembered how proud he had been of the building when it had been erected. All his careful organization had gone into it. He remembered the hundreds of forms he had to fill up to obtain the necessary building material, the plaintive bickering of the authorities who had tried to persuade him that prefabricated concrete sheds would do as well. But he had persisted, argued and cajoled, until they had given way in grudging despair.

And now he was going to set fire to the place. It would finish Wesley as Wesley had finished him. All Wesley's money was tied up in the mass of intricate and delicate machinery housed in the building. In a little while it would be an inferno of flames. There was a drum of petrol in one of the outside sheds. He would drag it to the building. A match would do the rest.

He stood looking at the lighted window, wondering if Wesley were still in the building, and as he watched the light went out. He waited, hidden in the shadows, and after a few minutes a man came out of the building. He recognized the limping walk. It was the senior watchman. He was going to supper.

IV

Anyone looking into the room could easily have mistaken the scene to have been one of domestic bliss. Wesley sat in an arm-chair. From time to time he selected a paper from a table by his side and studied it, making neat notes in the margin. Opposite him sat Julie. She was knitting a complicated pattern in blue and white. The two coloured balls of wool rested in her lap and her knitting needles clicked and flashed as she fashioned the pattern with expert speed.

Except for the click of the needles and the rustle of papers silence had hung over the room for a long time. Julie had wanted to go out that evening but Wesley had refused. Rather than go alone she had brought her knitting into his room and, without his permission, had sat by the fire. After one surprised glance he had continued to work, and now she was sure he had forgotten her.

She had been alone all day and yearned for company. Even Wesley's silent company was better than being on her own, and now as she knitted, the warmth of the fire against her legs, she felt herself relaxing, and for the first time for many weeks she experienced an isolated peace of mind.

Then, suddenly, she was startled out of her blank, comfortable mood by the shrill ringing of the telephone. The sharp sound of the urgent bell brought into the quiet room an atmosphere of alarm. Even Wesley started, his mind jerked away from his calculations.

"I sometimes wish telephones had never been invented," he said, laying down his papers. "Would you answer it, Julie? Say I'm busy."

Julie put down her knitting and, with ill grace, went to the telephone. A man's voice asked for Wesley.

"It's very urgent," he said. "I am calling from the factory." There was an excited note in his voice and he spoke loudly.

"It's the factory," she said to Wesley and held out the receiver. He took it from her and their fingers touched. Julie snatched her hand away and moved back to the fire.

She could hear the man shouting; his voice, although loud, was indistinct. She caught the word "fire" and looked quickly at Wesley, sensing immediately that something was wrong. Wesley had stiffened and his face had gone a whitish grey.

"I'll come out."

The man went on shouting.

"All right, all right," Wesley said quietly. "Yes, keep him there until I come. I'm coming now." He set down the receiver and stood for a moment looking at Julie. There was a dead expression in his eyes that frightened her.

“What is it?”

“Benton has set fire to the lab. I’ve got to go out there at once.”

“Benton? But why?”

“Does it matter?” He shook his head and pressed his palms to his temples, like a boxer trying to shake off the effects of a damaging punch.

“Do you want me to come with you?” She made the offer without thinking.

He pulled himself together with an effort.

“I suppose so. I may as well keep up the pretence a little longer, anyway until I see the extent of the damage. It’d look odd if I didn’t have someone to lead me about, wouldn’t it? Besides, the fire might amuse you. It should be an awe-inspiring sight.”

The cold, flat note in his voice sent a shiver through her. “Is it bad then?”

“It seems so. Come on; with luck we’ll find a taxi.”

They picked up a taxi in Piccadilly.

For some time Wesley stared through the window in silence as the taxi weaved a way through the last of the evening’s traffic, then he said abruptly : “It’s strange how things work out, isn’t it, Julie? I thought I had been so thorough and nothing could go wrong. The laboratory was, of course, the key to everything, and yet I never gave it a thought. It doesn’t look as if your friend Gleb will stand trial now.”

Julie stared searchingly at his white face.

“I don’t understand.”

“If the lab. is burned out there’s no point in my working any more. It puts a full stop to everything.”

“You mean you wouldn’t have the time?”

“Or the money.”

Julie recoiled from him as if he had hit her.

“What has money to do with it?”

“To equip the lab. I borrowed money. To borrow money I gave securities. If the lab’s gone my securities have gone with it.”

Julie suddenly felt as if she were going to be sick.

“You mean you won’t have any money? Then what’s to become of me? You promised to settle money on me!”

“I know. I’m sorry, Julie, but I couldn’t foresee this, could I? There won’t be anything left of my money. Everything I owned went into the lab. But you’ll have the furs and the jewellery. They are worth a good bit. If you’re careful you’ll be all right.”

“You’ve cheated me!” she cried furiously. “After all I’ve been through; after all your rotten promises! Damn you! I might have known this would happen. All right, you won’t get any more time. I’m

going to the police. I'll make you pay for this."

"I'm sorry, Julie. You don't really deserve anything, but a promise is a promise. I would have kept my word. I want you to believe that."

"You talk! That's all you're any good at—talking! You talked me into this ! You and your rotten promises!" Tears of rage ran down her face and she sat huddled up in the corner of the taxi, her hands clenched in her lap.

"You'll have the furs. I hope they'll give you some happiness. You're due for a little happiness, but somehow I don't think you'll get it. What will you do, Julie? Will you wait for Gleb to come out of prison? You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said fiercely. "He's worth six of you. I'll wait for him. You can think of us while they're hanging you!"

The taxi rattled past the White City. For a moment or so the inside of the taxi was lit up by the battery of arc lamps that had blazed up for the last race. And in the hard, glaring light they looked at each other.

"Try not to be bitter about it, Julie. I have lost much more than you. But then, I suppose I'm a lot older than you and I've learned to accept disappointments. If I had more time I would begin again, but that is impossible now. It looks as if Blanche has had the last laugh after all. It was a mistake to have killed her. You see, it hasn't done me any good."

Julie didn't say anything; her mind was seething with dismay and fury. After all she had endured from him and now no money!

"I would never have believed Benton had the nerve to do such a thing," Wesley went on. The swiftly passing street lamps lit up his white face. He looked tired and sad. "They say he's badly burned."

"Oh, shut up!" Julie exclaimed, beating her fists together. She was beside herself with disappointment. "That's all you're any good at, talking and making rotten promises." She swung round to face him. "And how do I know you'll give me the furs after all this? How do I know you won't cheat me again?"

"Go to my bank in the morning. They'll have a letter for you. There's a statement, too, for the police. I've put everything in order."

"You go. Why should I run errands for you? It's going to be different now. I'm not going to be ordered about any more."

"Poor Julie," he said wearily. "I'm very sorry for you."

The taxi began to slow down as the traffic thickened. In the distance they could see a vast red glow in the sky.

"There it is," he went on quietly. "I said it would be an awe-inspiring sight, didn't I?"

She noticed his hands were trembling but she felt no pity for him. At least she would have the furs. She would keep the Arctic fox and

sell the others. With the money she raised on the furs and the jewellery and with the money Harry must have put by they should be all right.

As the taxi neared the factory they could see the flames and the spirals of oily, black smoke outlined against the red sky. Lines of cars were parked on either side of the road, and a big crowd was moving towards the fire. The night was full of sounds : excited voices, laughter, the shuffling of feet. Somewhere in the crowd a dog was barking; a sharp sound that blended with the dry crackling of burning timber.

A policeman stopped the taxi.

"You can't get through," he said, with patient good humour. The hoses arc across the road."

"We'll walk," Wesley said, and got out of the car. "Will you wait?" he went on to the driver. The young lady will be coming back."

Julie followed him along the grass verge and they quickly caught up with the slow-moving crowd. Wesley caught hold of her arm and began to weave his way through the crowd, pulling her up with him. A man jostled him and knocked off his dark glasses. Julie, coming up behind, trod on them. She felt the lenses crunch under her foot. It gave her an odd physical satisfaction. He was finished, she thought. The breaking of the glasses seemed to her to be the final milestone of their association.

"They've broken," she said to him.

"What does it matter? Don't you see, Julie, for me nothing matters now."

They reached the gates of the factory. Now they could hear the hiss of water striking red-hot metal. The roar of the flames sounded near, and the air was hot and dry. Wesley spoke to one of the policemen guarding the gate. He showed him a card and the policeman let him through.

Gerridge came running out of the smoke towards them. There was a long streak of oily soot across his face and a shocked, scared look in his eyes.

"Is it bad?" Wesley asked, gripping his arm.

Gerridge gulped. For a moment he couldn't say anything. He clung on to Wesley's arm while he tried to get his breath.

"There's nothing left," he burst out. "It's awful. The place is a roaring furnace. They can't save it."

"And Benton?" Wesley spoke quietly.

"He's badly burned, but he's alive." Gerridge was staring at Wesley. "Your eyes, sir. Are they all right? They look all right. Can you see?"

"Yes, I can see. Take me to Benton."

"That's marvellous." Gerridge seemed bewildered. "But when did it

happen? Was it the operation . . . ?”

“Take me to Benton,” Wesley said curtly.

Gerridge stiffened.

“He’s in there, sir.” He pointed to a small building near the main block of offices. “I must get back. We’re shifting our files in case the fire spreads.”

“All right. You get off.” Wesley turned to Julie. “Come with me.”

They had to step over long lines of hose and through big oily puddles of water that swamped the concrete before they reached the building. They found Benton lying on the floor, his head pillowed on an overcoat, a blanket thrown over him. A policeman was sitting on an office chair near him and he stood up when Wesley came in.

“I’m Howard Wesley. May I speak to him?”

“Yes, sir. He’s bad. Got burned about the legs. They’re moving him as soon as the ambulance arrives.”

Julie hung back as Wesley went over to the still figure. “Hello, Hugh,” Wesley said, and knelt down on one knee. Benton opened his pale eyes.

“Who’s that?” he asked feebly. “Wesley?”

“Yes. Are you badly hurt?”

Benton frowned. His big, white teeth bit down on his lip. It was some moments before he spoke, then the words came out in a desperate little torrent of pain.

“I wish I hadn’t done it. I wanted to get even with you, but as soon as the flames started I knew it was wrong. All that work. I tried to put it out but the flames got me in the end. I thought I was finished.” He closed his eyes, added, “I wish I was.”

“You’ll be all right. We all do things we shouldn’t do. Regretting them is the worst part. I regret things, too. I know how you feel. We’re so sure of ourselves when we’re doing wrong, and it’s only afterwards we see how stupid we have been.”

“Yes; that’s right. I’m sorry, Wesley. I really am sorry.”

“We had a bit of fun putting the place together, didn’t we?” Wesley said and smiled. “It was as much your work as mine.” Benton stared up at the white, tired face.

“I didn’t expect ever to hear that from you. It’s good of you.” A shudder ran through his thin body and he clenched his fists. “It feels as if my legs are still on fire.”

“They’ll fix you up all right. The ambulance won’t be long.”

“If it hadn’t been for Blanche we might have got on together,” Benton said. There was sweat on his face now.

“Yes . . . Blanche.” Wesley stood up. “I want to take a last look at the lab. I thought I’d see you first.”

“Something’s happened to you,” Benton said weakly. “I don’t know

what it is. Is it your eyes?"

"Don't worry about that. Don't worry about anything. So long, Hugh." Wesley leaned forward and held out his hand. "You'll be all right."

Benton gripped his hand.

"I wouldn't have believed it. I thought you would hate me like hell. I've been a fool. I'm sorry. I'm damned sorry."

"So long," Wesley said quietly, and withdrew his hand. He turned to the door. "Julie . . ."

She went to him.

The police officer looked at them curiously.

"Come with me, Julie."

There was a great crash outside as one of the walls of the laboratory collapsed. They stood for a moment in the smoke and the heat, side by side, looking at each other.

"Go back to the flat. The taxi is waiting," Wesley said. "See Dawson tomorrow and give him the statement. That'll get Gleb out of trouble. Be carefull how you sell the furs. You should be all right. I hope you'll find happiness, Julie."

She stared at him, bewildered. It was difficult to hear his voice above the roar of the flames.

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry about me. Here's Gerridge. Gerridge, will you see Miss Holland to her taxi?"

Then Wesley walked rapidly away.

"Where's he going?" Julie cried, suddenly frightened. "Stop him! You mustn't let him go!"

She began to run after Wesley, but Gerridge pulled her back.

"It isn't safe !"

"Let go of me !" she cried, broke away and ran on.

Wesley had disappeared round the main office block. As she turned the corner of the building the heat hit her like a blow in the face. Smoke and sparks swirled towards her, reaching out for her, driving her back.

Firemen, sheltered behind a nearby building, were playing water on to the roaring furnace. Suddenly one of them began shouting. He had seen Wesley walking towards the burning building. Two other firemen broke cover and began to run after him. They didn't get far. The scorching heat drove them back. Wesley didn't seem to notice the heat. He walked on, his hands in his trousers pockets, his head up. Julie watched him, her hands shielding her face, and she saw his clothes were smouldering, and suddenly narrow ribbons of flame flickered at his wrists and ankles. She hid her face, screaming.

Gerridge caught a glimpse of Wesley surrounded by flames. There

was a great tearing, crunching noise and the blazing mass of wood and metal came down, blotting Wesley from sight. A long, brilliant tongue of flame shot up, marking the place where he had been.

V

With Wesley's letter authorizing her to take the furs and his statement for the police in her possession, Julie knew exactly what she was going to do. Harry's trial was due to begin the following day so it would be a last-minute rescue, the kind of thing you imagine can only happen on the films. Harry, she felt, would never forget that it was she who had saved him from the gallows. But before she rescued Harry she decided to get the furs. Then she would see Dawson. But first it was essential to get the furs. She would feel much more confident if she wore the Arctic fox. Dawson would be impressed and, after the familiar way he had treated her in the past, she was determined he should be impressed. Once he had read the statement he was bound to let her see Harry. She supposed Harry would have to stand his trial for the robbery, but she would tell him she would wait for him. He would be able to face his sentence bravely, she thought, if he knew she would be waiting at the prison gates when he came out. She became quite sentimental about that thought, and even cried a little, picturing Harry coming through the great prison gateway, shivering and cold, the snow (there had to be snow, she decided) powdering his thin overcoat, and she in her furs, snug in a big car, would take him tenderly in her arms.

Wesley had gone completely from her mind. His death meant a new life for her. She had had a bad hour or so after seeing him walk into the fire, but with her mind so much on Harry she quickly forgot him. It wasn't as if he ever liked her, she reasoned to herself. He had used her for his own ends and deserved no pity. It was maddening that she wouldn't have a steady income. She couldn't forgive him for cheating her at the last moment. But at least she had capital. She remembered Mrs. French had said the furs were worth thirty thousand pounds. That was as good as winning the Irish sweepstake! You could do a lot with thirty thousand pounds. Then there was the jewellery. Diamonds were fetching a good price now. She should make quite a bit out of the jewellery. She decided she wouldn't tell Harry that Wesley had given her the jewellery, but she would tell him about the furs. She would keep the jewellery in a bank just in case something went wrong. She wasn't absolutely sure that Harry and she would hit it off together. A girl had to be careful, she told herself.

Wesley's statement to the police completely cleared Harry. Explaining how he had persuaded Blanche to return to the flat with him, he wrote that he had staged a quarrel about Benton in the taxi, and had hinted that Benton was having an affair with Julie. Blanche had risen to the bait, knowing Benton's weakness. Wesley had told

her that Benton intended to see Julie as soon as Blanche and Wesley had left for the theatre. That was enough for Blanche. She stopped only long enough at the theatre for a drink, and then she and Wesley had returned to the flat by underground and had entered the building by the garage entrance. As Blanche was opening the front door, Wesley, remaining in the lift, had shot her and had thrown the gun into the hall. He had closed the lift gate a split second before the police arrived. It had been a near thing, but it had succeeded. The gun, he wrote, belonged to an American soldier, and he gave the man's name and service number. He had bought it from him a couple of years ago and he was sure there would be no difficulty in tracing it.

Julie hugged the envelope containing the statement to her as she walked along Piccadilly. It represented Harry's life. It was more than that: it was her future happiness as well. If she lost it nothing could save Harry. She clutched the envelope tightly, wondering if it wouldn't be safer to take a taxi to the Kensington police station at once, just in case something did happen to it. But the temptation to go to Park Way and put on the Arctic fox to impress Dawson proved too strong. She knew she would look wonderful in the fur : like a film star. So she slipped the envelope into her handbag and looked up and down Piccadilly for a taxi.

As she was being whisked along Park Lane towards Knightsbridge, she continued to build castles in the air. The furs were worth thirty thousand. Of course, she wouldn't get quite that amount for them, but if she got twenty thousand, think what she could do with it! If Harry wanted to stay in London it would be marvellous fun to find a flat and furnish it so it would be ready for him when he was released. While she was planning the colour scheme of the bedroom the taxi drew up outside Park Way.

She was a little uneasy about meeting the hall porter, but she needn't have been. The hall porter had gone to lunch and his assistant hadn't yet taken over. She found the entrance hall deserted.

No one saw her as she unlocked the front door of Wesley's flat and entered. For a moment or so she stood just inside the hall, listening. It was odd to be back here, to see the faint brown stain still on the carpet and to smell once again Blanche's perfume that still clung persistently in the air.

She went quickly to Blanche's room, shut the door and snapped off the alarms. Then she opened the safe, turned off the light operating the photo-electric cell and stood for a moment admiring the furs. They were hers now; hers to do what she liked with. It was a moment of triumph. But she wasn't going to forget the jewellery. Up to this moment she hadn't had the chance of seeing Blanche's complete collection, and the thought sent a thrill through her. They, too, would

realize a lot of money.

She pushed the furs aside and stepped into the safe, putting her handbag on the top of the steel cabinet containing the jewellery. Then she realized in dismay she had no idea how to open the cabinet. The smooth, highly-polished door of the cabinet had no apparent keyhole, but there was a small black knob set in the centre of the door. She touched it, frowning, then her fingers tightened on it and she pulled.

There was a sudden rush of escaping air and doors of the safe slammed shut.

They found her four days later. It was Dawson who suddenly wondered if she had gone to collect her spoils and had been trapped in the safe. When at last they opened the doors they found her lying on the floor with the white Arctic fox she had coveted so much covering her, and Wesley's statement clutched tightly in her hand. They were too late to do anything for her, but Harry was more fortunate. He got off with eighteen months. Oddly enough it was snowing when he came out, but there was no beautifully dressed young woman to meet him, only a Salvation Army lass who shook a self-denial collection box under his nose.

THE END

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